

# The Incarnation

*Jesus Christ as fully human, fully divine*

## FACT OF INCARNATION

### The issue

The incarnation is at the epicentre of the Christian faith, but what was it that God was doing in the person of the Messiah? Jesus asks the tantalising question:

‘What do you think of the Christ?  
Whose son is he?’  
(Mat 22:42)

The Christian community down through the centuries has, on the basis of scripture, replied:

‘Christ is the Son of God and the son of man,  
truly God and truly human’.

It is not difficult for a person to maintain either the divinity or the humanity of Jesus on their own. The difficulty is to hold both truths together at the same time; however, it is just this fact that is proclaimed by the truth of the incarnation.

### Christ come ‘in the flesh’

The word ‘incarnation’ comes from the Latin *in carne* (‘in flesh’). Incarnation, because of its Latin origin, is not a biblical word, however, its Greek equivalent *en sarki* is found in some very important passages. One of the most significant and fundamental statements about the incarnation is the one found in John 1:14:

‘And the word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory,  
the glory as of the father’s only son,  
full of grace and truth’.

The essence of the passage can be paraphrased:

‘The eternal creative Word of God became a human being  
and pitched his tent alongside us,  
and we were confronted with the weight of his presence ...  
a complete demonstration of self-giving and reality’.

Here the combining of divinity and humanity in a human being is declared as an historical fact and is shown in its profound dimensions.

Other important biblical passages that emphasise the fact of the incarnation are:

- 1Tim 3:16 ... ‘he was manifested in the flesh’
- 1Jn 4:2 ... ‘Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’



- 2Jn 7 .....‘the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh’
- Col 1:22...’reconciled in his body of flesh by his death’
- Eph 2:15...’abolishing in his flesh the law’
- 1Pet 3:18...’Christ dying for us in the flesh’
- 1Pet 4:1...’Christ suffered in the flesh’
- Heb 5:7 ... ‘in the days of his flesh’

Each of these scriptures emphasise both the historical fact and the biblical truth of the incarnation.

This recurring phrase ‘the flesh’ emphasises the whole person from the perspective of their humanity and physical existence, as part of the created world and in contrast to the divine. It emphasises human weakness, impotence and mortality, dependent life that requires a physical organism to sustain it. So when it says that Jesus came, was born, lived and died ‘in the flesh’ it is stressing that he embraced all the conditions of psychological and physical life. In the complete sense of the word Jesus became ‘a human being’; nevertheless, at the same time he eternally was and continued to be God.

### **Incarnation not theophany**

Many different attempts have been made to explain away the idea of the incarnation:

- Some suggest it was the idea of later Christian teachers
- Some suggest it came from Jewish speculation about a pre-existent super human Messiah
- Some suggest it is similar to the polytheistic myths about a redeemer god that abounded in the mystery religions of the ancient world

On examination the differences between these suggestions and the biblical statements are so clear. In these pagan myths, (eg the *avatars* of Vishnu in Hinduism), the god disguises themselves, never truly being human, throwing off the disguise as soon as their task is accomplished.

The incarnation of Jesus is unique in world religion, and looking at the evidence of the gospels we can see that it was part of the understanding of the followers of Jesus from the beginning; spoken about by Jesus and confessed by the disciples before his ascension into heaven.

## **NATURE OF INCARNATION**

### **Mission not speculation**

The writers of the New Testament were not interested in speculating about the philosophical, physical and psychological implications of the incarnation. They are interested only in its spiritual and evangelistic truth. Almost every reference to the incarnation is emphasising God’s redeeming purpose for humanity. The deity and manhood of Jesus are fundamental to his saving work. If he is to become the ‘last (second) Adam’, covenant head of the new race of redeemed people he must take a body like ours.



## Jesus' humanity

Apart from the scriptures with which we began our study, which stressed that Jesus was truly human by using the phrase 'in the flesh'; there are other scriptures that make the same emphasis. Jesus is referred to as, 'the **man** Christ Jesus' (1Tim 2:5):

- 'God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law' (Gal 4:4)
- 'Since ... children share flesh and blood he himself likewise partook of the same nature' (Heb 2:14)
- 'Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect (Heb 2:17)

Jesus was truly a human being amidst humanity.

There is ample evidence that he experienced all the emotions and frailty of a human being. He knew hunger (Mat 4:2; Mk 11:12), tiredness (Jn 4:6; Mk 4:38), thirst (Jn 4:7; 19:28), tears (Jn 11:35), anger (Jn 11:38), he could be deeply moved with emotion (Mk 1:41).

He had to face all the human temptations and moral conflicts:

- He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan (Mk 1:13)
- The devil ... departed ... until an opportune time (Lk 4:13)
- He himself has suffered and been tempted (Heb 2:18)
- One who in every respect has been tempted as we are [Heb 4:15]

## Jesus' deity

Jesus deity was not something read back into the story at some later date, but a fact that he and others recognised and declared during his lifetime:

- It was something he himself had recognised by the time he was twelve years old, "Did you not know I must be in my Father's house" (Lk 2:49)
- None other than God himself gave vocal witness to the fact that this was his *agapetos* - unique and beloved son (Mk 9:7)
- At his trial (Mk 14:62), debating with the Pharisees (Jn 8:58), at his arrest in the garden (Jn 18:5-8), and on other occasions, Jesus referred to himself as 'I am', the sacred name of Yahweh
- He told Philip that to see him was to see the Father (Jn 14:9)
- The disciple Thomas gave Jesus worship as 'my Lord and my God' (Jn 20:28), but did not receive any rebuke from Jesus

## Truly God, truly human

In his pre-incarnate state Jesus was 'in the form of God' (Phil 2:6); or as J.B.Phillips expressed it, 'always ... God by nature'. Jesus was eternally adorned in the glory of the Godhead (Jn 17:5). In 'becoming flesh' his deity was not abandoned, reduced or contracted. He did not cease to exercise the divine functions he had before his incarnation (Heb 1:3). As a free act of love he took upon himself human nature; 'for our sakes he became poor' (2Cor 8:9).



In the words of the much debated passage in Philipians 2:7, 'he emptied himself'. People have propounded the '*Kenosis* (emptied) Theory', which argues Jesus curtailed his divine powers during the incarnation; but this does not match with the biblical evidence. The phrase 'emptied himself' almost certainly has in mind the phrase 'poured out his soul unto death' in Isaiah 53:12, which is speaking of life being poured out as sacrificial libation for others. The use of this phrase in Philipians it has no sense of restriction or diminishing.

Of Jesus in his incarnated state it is said:

- 'He is the out shining of the glory of God and bears the engraving of his nature' (Heb 1:3)
- 'In him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell ... making peace by the blood of his cross' (Col 1:19-20)
- 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (Col 2:9)

'The incarnation of the Son of God was not the diminishing of deity, but an acquiring of humanity'. In Jesus' incarnation he unites true deity with true humanity in his personal self. The communion of attributes is such that at any time we may speak of him in any way that is proper to speak either of God or of a human being. This fact is powerfully illustrated in the words of Acts 20:28 (where the best MSS read):

'God having purchased the church with his own blood'

The nature and character of Jesus the Son of God was sinless (2Cor 5:21; 1Pet 2:22; Heb 4:15; cf. Mat 3:14-17; Jn 8:46; 1Jn 2:1-2). He did not die for his own sins (Heb 7:26), he died vicariously (2Cor 5:21; Rom 5:16-17; Gal 3:13; 1Pet 1:19; 3:18). In this he shows us that to be truly human we have to be like God. Through his death, resurrection and the power of the Spirit we can in fact begin to become like God, and so become like him. The incarnation is the model and pattern for the present and the future as both present and future combine in Jesus.

The nature of the incarnation of course presents us with an unfathomable mystery:

- How can the creator of the universe be contained in the physical and psychological limitations of a newborn baby?
- How can miraculously undiminished deity moved through all the natural developments of childhood and youth?

Jesus lived always in total dependence and obedience to his Father (Jn 5:19,30), but this obedience had to be 'learned' (Heb 5:8). We get something of an insight into the paradox in the events of Luke 2:41-52 when he visited the Temple with his parents at twelve years old:

- On one hand there are the amazing answers to questions (v 46), the statement, 'Did you not know I must be in my Father's house?' (v 49)
- On the other hand there is the natural curiosity and absent-mindedness of a young teenager; note the closing phrase, 'he increased in wisdom, favour and stature' (v 52)



## FOCUS 1: THE VIRGIN BIRTH

For all the enormous differences that exist between the birth stories of Matthew and Luke they both state simply and categorically that the birth of Jesus was from a young woman who was a virgin (Mat 1:18-25; Lk 1:26-38). The text states emphatically that:

- Mary and Joseph had not had sexual intercourse
- Jesus was born without human fatherhood through the Holy Spirit

Neither writer hints as to why this should have happened this way, nor do they draw any conclusions from it.

Though Matthew and Luke are most explicit in their statements there are other clues written in the New Testament:

- **Jn 8:41** suggests there were obviously rumours about Jesus being illegitimate, so the Jews say clearly, 'we were not born of fornication'; implying he was.
- **Gal 4:4** Paul uses the more general verb *ginomai* when speaking of Jesus' birth, 'God sent forth his son coming from a woman', but in v 23, when speaking of Ishmael, he uses the verb *ginnas* which tends to associate the husband.
- **Jn 1:13** says that Christians are born, 'not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a husband, but of God', so was Jesus the Messiah not also born like this?
- **Mk 6:3** makes an indirect implication in, 'Is not this the carpenter, the Son of Mary?' especially when compared with the parallel passages in Matthew 13:55 and Luke 4:22.
- **1Cor 15:45-48** points to both the first and second Adam coming miraculously from the hand of God.

Attempts to argue that the virgin birth was an idea developed later under influence of pagan ideas are clearly foolish:

- The stories are as Jewish as anything in the New Testament
- There is not a single parallel in pagan religion and mythology to the virgin birth of Jesus. None have virgin births, rather they are mere legends about women giving birth to great leaders through having intercourse with a divine being; utterly repellent to the biblical mind
- The virgin birth is also quite unlike the miraculous births of people in the Hebrew scriptures like Isaac, Samson and Samuel. These were not virgin births, as in each case there was a human father

The virgin birth does not fulfil Hebrew prophecy in quite the way many have imagined. Matthew's quotation of Isaiah 7:14 needs careful examination:

- The circumstances of the passage in Isaiah see King Ahaz facing invasion from Israel and Syria to force him to join them against Assyria
- The prophet Isaiah offers him to choose a sign to show that God will save him; he refuses with mock modesty, angry Isaiah gives him a sign anyway



- A 'young woman' [Heb 'alma'] will give birth to a child, in the 9 months from conception to birth the situation will have so changed, Ahaz's enemies will be no more, that the child will be named 'Emmanuel' (God with us)
- At its first level this is not a Messianic prophecy about a virgin birth; the word *alma* is not the word for 'virgin' (Heb *betulah*). *Alma* comes from the root 'to be sexually mature'; a woman of marriageable age who has not yet borne children, though she may be married
- The LXX, from which Matthew is quoting, translates *alma* with *parthenos* ('virgin'). This word, plus the title 'God with us', makes it easy for Matthew to see a further fulfilment of these words in the birth of Jesus. Christ is a sign from God that the invading powers of evil are about to be defeated
- So Isaiah 7:14 is not a prophecy about the 'virgin birth', but the events that surrounded this now anonymous young woman can be used to picture far greater events surrounding the birth of the Messiah

It is significant to note that *parthenogenesis* (virgin birth) is not an uncommon phenomenon biologically; single cells being stimulated into embryonic development. However parthenogenic births are *always female* as there is no 'Y' chromosome to provide possible male characteristics. So the virgin birth of Jesus is confirmed as being quite possible physically, but it is the fact that he was *male* which emphasises, even more, the miraculous nature of his birth.

If Mary and Joseph had conceived the child there is no way in which the embryo could have been 'cleansed' or taken over in order for it to contain the second person of the Godhead. The female ovum supplies half the genetic material needed to form a human being, the male sperm supplies the other half. United and then by 'mitotic' cell division the human being is formed. The Holy Spirit must have fashioned the necessary chromosomes and genes to unite with those of the virgin.

This Jesus is in one person, perfectly divine and perfectly human. Apart from its necessity it proclaims the truth that God has set in motion events that will culminate in both judgment and salvation. It marks out Jesus as unique from other 'holy' people or religious geniuses.

The beautiful words of Luke 1:35, 'the power of the most High will overshadow you' recalls the story of Ruth, and the marriage metaphor, 'I am your handmaid: therefore spread your skirt over your handmaid' (Ruth 3:9). Ruth is the ancestress of both David and the Messiah, and so the Rabbis often interpreted her life as prefiguring Messianic events. Mary's final reply, 'Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord' (Lk 1:38) completes the picture.

## FOCUS 2: THE TRANSFIGURATION

As Jesus moved towards the climax of his ministry, the death on the cross he went quietly to pray, (Mat 17:1-8; Mk 9:2-8; Lk 9:28-36). The three disciples who were allowed to accompany him were briefly given a glimpse of the true dimension of the incarnation. While he was praying, his divine majesty shone through him so powerfully that his physical appearance was changed and the very clothes that he wore radiated with the divine light. The true source of Jesus' being was revealed. He was seen to be what would later be said of him, 'the outshining of the glory of God' (Heb 1:3). His glory is revealed in a most personal way, (not just in his deeds as John emphasises). The glory denoted the royal presence, the kingdom of God is in the midst of his people. The power of this event is such



that it has led some liberal scholars to argue that this is a 'resurrection story' out of place! The truth is, instead, that we have here a dynamic illustration of what the incarnation really is.

## **DEBATE ABOUT INCARNATION**

We have already noted that it was not the interest of the New Testament writers to speculate about the details of the nature of the incarnation. However, history has shown repeatedly that attacks on the person of Christ are attacks on the very heart of our faith. If Jesus is God and not man he is no longer our pattern, if he is just human being and not God our revelation of God as the one who is love and comes to redeem us, is impoverished. Nevertheless, attacks have certainly come.

### **Ebionites**

They get their name from the Hebrew *ebionim*, 'the poor men' (cf Lk 6:20). At the fall of Jerusalem in 70, some survivors from Qumran joined with certain members of the Jewish Christian community, causing a split. The Ebionites exalted the Law, regarded Jesus as the son of Mary and Joseph who was elected Son of God at his baptism, united with the eternal Christ who is higher than the archangels but not divine. The Jesus of the Ebionites was a teacher rather than a saviour.

### **Docetism**

They take their name from the Greek *dokein*, 'to seem', 'to appear to be'. Having their roots in Greek and oriental philosophy the Docetics taught that Jesus was not a real man, only a phantom, an appearance, a sort of divine hologram. Such teaching not only undermines the incarnation but also the atonement and the resurrection. With their belief that 'matter' is evil the whole concept of the incarnation was unthinkable to them. So it was argued that God created the appearance of Jesus as an illustration to educate people but he was never a human being in any true sense of the word. We know that the aging apostle John contended with Carinthus, a Docetic in Ephesus at the close of the New Testament era. This may be one reason why his writings have so much emphasis upon Jesus coming 'in the flesh'. Jerome said, 'the blood of Christ was still fresh in Judea when his body was said to be a phantom!'

### **Adoptionists**

This is the view that Jesus was a human being of blameless life who, at his baptism, became the 'adopted' Son of God. He had shown himself to be such a naturally good person and so God chose him as one who was uniquely capable of revealing the character and purposes of God. In their desire to emphasise the oneness of God and the stress they place upon the power of the Spirit at Jesus' 'adoption' they are often known as 'dynamic monarchians'. Adoptionists miss the whole truth of God revealing himself in humanity, not simply someone reflecting God.

### **Apollinarius**

Apollinarius was born about 310 in Syria, and very influenced by the theology in Alexandria that stressed the divinity of Christ. In the wake of all the debates about the nature of the Godhead, Apollinarius pursued the hitherto unresolved question, "How could Jesus be God and human at one and the same time?" Nicene theology had stated Jesus was both God and human, but to express *how* they were united had not yet been



attempted in any statement. Apollinarius said that only God could save the world, so Jesus had to be perfectly and completely divine.

Apollinarius used 1Thessalonians 5:23 as his 'psychological' model (body, soul, spirit). He believed that the eternal Logos inhabited the 'spirit' of Jesus, his 'soul' and 'body' were united and 'experienced' life but Jesus had no independent mind, life or will apart from God. Jesus had no human source of initiative, for the Logos alone can save. So the divine Logos in Jesus was the active principle; the humanity of Jesus could 'experience' but it could not 'initiate'. Because Christ had no human spirit or mind he was sinless. However, this approach to explaining the incarnation is quite inadequate because it did not identify Jesus with full humanity.

It is very easy to fall into 'Apollinarianism' when trying to explain the incarnation in simple non-theological language, especially when you have a false biblical anthropology in the form of the tripartite / bipartite model of body, soul and spirit. Understanding personhood as a totality is essential to avoid error.

### **Nestorius**

Nestorius was born of Persian parents and became a monk in Antioch. By 428 he became the bishop of Constantinople. He was very influenced by the theology of Antioch, which stressed the humanity of Jesus. He attacked the title *Theotokos* ('Mother of God'), which was being used in Constantinople, substituting the title *Christotokos* (Mother of Christ). Cyril of Alexandria attacked him and he was condemned in 432 and died in the Egyptian desert in 451.

The ideas of Nestorius are trying to do justice to the humanity of Jesus in the face of other ideas that appear to over emphasise his divinity at the expense of his humanity. In order to cope with the demands of both Jesus' divinity and his humanity Nestorius develops a 'two nature' theory. It has been described as the 'oil and water' theory of the incarnation:

- In Jesus the divine and human natures remained unaltered and distinct in their union. Nestorius could not conceive of the divine Logos being involved in human suffering or change, so he wanted to hold the natures apart
- The life Jesus lived was a truly human life, which involved growth, temptation and suffering. Nestorius believed that this would have been impossible if the human nature was in anyway fused and overcome by the divine
- To solve the problem of the union of the two natures and to emphasise that he taught the doctrine of one 'person' who combined the two distinct elements, Nestorius said the Jesus of the Gospels was the 'common *prosopon* (face)' of union. In Jesus humanity had the form of God bestowed upon it, divinity took upon itself the form of a servant, the result being 'the *prosopon* of Jesus of Nazareth'
- For Nestorius, Jesus the Son of God, was one person *but* with two natures, with little more than moral and sympathetic union between them

It appears from Syrian translations that Nestorius used the word 'nature' in the way the Alexandrians used the word 'person'. So when Nestorius spoke of 'two natures' others thought he spoke of 'two persons'; a sort of schizophrenia, which is not what he was saying. It was the followers of Nestorius who taught that 'in Jesus the divine and the human were joined together without intermingling'; this is the real origin of Nestorianism.



In 451, at Chalcedon, Nestorius was condemned and expelled from the Church, but his followers were very evangelistic and did outstanding missionary work. Nestorian Syrian churches were founded in the Middle and Far East with some surviving to today.

## Monophysites

Eutyches, an elderly and unlearned monk, living near Constantinople, held that the human nature of Jesus became swallowed up in the divine and so was transmuted into the divine nature. Therefore the very body of Jesus was no longer of the same essence as ours, but a divine body. For this reason his ideas have been called the 'water and wine' theory of the incarnation. Eutyches argued that Christ was of two natures before the incarnation, but only one after it. This teaching became called *Monophysite* [Gk. 'only nature'], but the whole idea was really Docetism masquerading in a new disguise.

## Chalcedon

In 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, the church's statement on the doctrine of the incarnation was presented. Remember that creedal statements were only attempted when the very existence of the faith was believed to be under threat by false teaching, and only then the statements that were finally made were simply formed to deliberately exclude erroneous views. Creedal statements still allowing freedom of thought upon the mysteries of the Christian faith within a clear framework. Even after Chalcedon much latitude was allowed in discussion about the incarnation. It simply condemns the views of Apollinarius, Nestorius and Eutyches.

Chalcedon made the following affirmations about the incarnation:

- That the Lord Jesus Christ is one; his two natures (human and divine) are preserved in one person and substance
- Both natures (divine and human) are unimpaired, perfect, consubstantial with God and humanity, pre-existent and born of the virgin. Jesus is acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without changing, without division, without separation
- The distinct natures are fully divine and human and are no way abolished by the union; thus there is salvation by a saving God and a human person identified with humanity

This union of the human and divine nature is known as the 'Hypostatic union'. The word 'nature' is to be understood as 'being' or 'reality':

- The phrase 'divine nature' states 'he is not like God, he **is** God'
- The phrase 'human nature' states 'he is not God appearing like a human, he **is** human'

Jesus did not exchange divinity for humanity; he assumed humanity so that in the incarnation he is the 'God-human'. Both aspects are to be given equal emphasis; one is not emphasised at the expense of the other. The creed stands for a principle rather than a theory. It permits theories provided the principle is safeguarded. Theories will alter as our knowledge and understanding extend. Chalcedon hands down a 'standard' by which every theory is tested and judged.

There are three main criticisms of the way the Fathers discussed the incarnation:

- **They placed too great a gulf between God and humanity.** One of the profound truths of the incarnation is that organic union between God and us is possible; it is a vital part of what lies behind the statement that we are 'made in the image of God'. We must not



confuse humanity with divinity, the human remains human, and God remains divine. Perfect humanity is nothing less than divinity incarnate.

- **They had a weak psychology.** Their weak biblical anthropology and limited understanding of the nature of personhood led to the use of inadequate models and language.
- **They used far too impersonal terms.** Their words, 'substance', 'essence', 'nature' etc do not convey the truth of the dynamic living organism we call 'personality'. You cannot use the language of 'things' for 'persons'. The New Testament speaks of 'Christ in me', 'abiding in Christ'. Speaking about the incarnation needs more subtle human terms.

## Questions

1. Why is it impossible to completely understand the person of Jesus and the mystery of the incarnation? At what point does thought reach its limit?
2. Give your own definition of the incarnation. How does it compare with the statements of scripture and the creeds?
3. Thomas Merton said, "Jesus is how God sees himself." What do you think about this statement? If it is true, what do you think the incarnation of God, in Jesus, tells us about the character of God? In the incarnation Jesus reveals what God is like to the world. Both the church and individual Christians are called to continue this pattern. In the light of this how should it shape the way Christian people and communities live their lives?

## Reading and Resources

DM Baillie '**God was in Christ**' Faber & Faber 1956  
W Barclay '**Jesus as They Saw Him**' SCM 1962  
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