

The Human Face of God

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In this lesson we take up the biblical doctrine of the incarnation. The term *incarnation* is a Latinism meaning "embodied in human flesh." Simply put, this doctrine teaches that Christ was the human manifestation of God. Closely associated with this doctrine is the doctrine of pre-existence (i.e., that Christ existed prior to his becoming man in the incarnation). In the incarnation, however, God entered into human existence in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, essentially becoming "one of us."

The biblical teaching underlying this doctrine is rooted in many of the Old Testament messianic prophecies. Isaiah 7:14 teaches that a virgin maiden would miraculously conceive and give birth to a son whose name would reveal that he was none other than "God with us."

*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin (Hebrew *alma* / Greek OT, *parthenos*) shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name **Imman'u-el** (i.e., God is with us), (Isa 7:14).*

This very text is quoted by the Apostle Matthew as fulfilled in the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. Matt 1:20-23). In Isa 9:6, another prophecy is given foretelling the coming of God into the world and, here again, he is spoken of as coming into the world as a son born of woman, but his names would reveal his true identity:

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, **Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**" (Isa 9:6)*

One would think that these two Old Testament prophecies would have led the Jews to the conclusion that a visitation of God himself was promised in these verses. Since both passages were interpreted by the Jews as being fulfilled in the coming of the Messiah, one would expect the Jews to see a clear connection between the coming of the Messiah and a visitation of God. But this concept, although plainly taught in the Scriptures, was not seen by the Jewish scholars or the Jewish people. This fact seems even the more curious in view of the following messianic text:

*A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare **the way of the Lord** [in the Hebrew text, *Yahweh*] **make straight in the desert a highway for our God** [*Elohim*]. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And **the glory of the Lord** [*Yahweh*] **shall be revealed**, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." (Isaiah 40:3-5; cf. Matt 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 3:4-6)*

This passage clearly prophesies the coming of God (i.e., *Yahweh/Elohim*) and is quoted in the New Testament (Matt 2:3; Mark 1:1-3; Luke 3:3-6) as fulfilled in the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. The text promised the arrival of God and was fulfilled in the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth. Who, then, does this imply that Jesus was? This whole aspect of the identity of the Messiah is very strongly emphasized in the New Testament; cf. Matt 1:20-23; 3:17; 16:16; 17:2-5; John 1:1-2, 14, 19; 14:7-9; Rom 1:4; Phil 2:5-11; Heb 1:1-9. Although this theme is present throughout the New Testament, the case or New Testament *apologia* for the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth develops, essentially, from the following New Testament texts.

The Word Became Flesh

*In the beginning was **the Word**, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**. He was in the beginning with God; . . . Verse 14: **And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from***

*the Father. John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'" And from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through **Jesus Christ**. No one has ever seen God; **the only [begotten] Son**, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known, (John 1:1-18).*

This pre-existent one called "the Word/Logos" did not simply become a body or clothe himself with human flesh; rather, he became flesh (*sarx*) or human. As B. F. Westcott states:

*. . . 'flesh' expresses here human nature as a whole regarded under the aspect of its present corporeal embodiment, including of necessity the 'soul' (12:27), and the 'spirit' (11:33; 12:21; 19:30), as belonging to the totality of man (comp. Heb 2:14), (B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John*, p. 11).*

It is very important to see that the New Testament doctrine of the incarnation portrays Jesus as possessing full humanity. The biblical view of man is that he is a being consisting of body, soul, and spirit (cf. 1 Thess 5:23). According to the New Testament, Jesus possessed all three aspects of human existence: **body or human flesh** (Rom 8:3; 1 Tim 3:16; Heb 2:14; 5:7), **soul** (Acts 2:25-27), and **spirit** (Matt 27:50).

The fact that must be seen here is that Jesus was truly and fully human, as much as we are human. He was truly "one of us," and this portrayal of Christ is present throughout the New Testament Scriptures, as is evidenced in the following.

He is called "man" or "a man": Matt 8:27; John 7:46; 8:40; 10:33; 19:5; Acts 2:22; 10:38; 17:31; Rom 5:15; 1 Cor 15:21, 45, 47; Phil 2:8; 1 Tim 2:5.

He possessed all aspect of human existence (i.e., body, soul and spirit): a human body (Matt 26:12, 26; Luke 24:39), *human flesh and soul* (Acts 2:25-27), *human soul* (Matt 26:38; John 12:27), and *human spirit* (Matt

27:50; Luke 23:45; John 11:33; 13:21; 19:30).

He appeared as a man: he had a human body (Luke 2:16; Heb 10:5), had a human genealogy (Matt 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38), he experienced human maturation or development (i.e., he grew, became strong and was fill with wisdom [Luke 2:40]), he was thought to be Joseph's son (Luke 4:22), he was called a man by the Jews and Pilate (John 18:29; 19:5), he was a Jew by race (John 18:33-35; Rom 1:1-4), he bled and died as a man (John 19:17-18, 32-34), appeared as a man/human after his resurrection (John 20:14-17; 21:4-5), and was called a man even after his ascension to the Father (Acts 2:2; 17:30-31; 1 Tim 2:5).

He behaved as a man: he hungered (Matt 4:2; 21:28), slept (Matt 8:24), was moved with compassion (Matt 9:36), felt anger and grief (Matt 10:21), he loved (John 4:6), became weary (John 4:6), he groaned and was troubled (John 4:33), he wept (John 11:35), he thirsted (John 19:28), and suffered, bled and died as a man (John 19:17-18, 23, 28-37).

Paul states clearly that Jesus was a man, a human being, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and man, a man (*anthropos*), Christ Jesus," (1 Tim 2:5). Jesus of Nazareth was a man in the fullest sense of the word. From the likeness painted of him by the writers of the Gospels, one sees him truly as a man; a man whose hands were scarred from the carpenter's labor, whose skin was tanned by the Palestinian sun, whose face showed the features of strength and character, whose eyes could pierce one's soul, whose voice was strong enough to shout above a storm yet soft enough to draw little children to him.

One sees him as a man capable of deep feeling whose affection for his fellowman reached out and enveloped him. He was a man who touched people with his mind and his spirit, whose life said to other lives, "I care." He was a man who communicated with his fellowman as one of them, a man whose mind reached out and took hold of other minds and filled them with the teachings of God, teachings so unique and beautiful they held his listeners spellbound. He spoke to people concerning things they had longed for ages to hear. They knew that what they were hearing was marvelous and

wonderful, and that the one from whom they were hearing these things was just as marvelous and wonderful. He was a man in the fullest sense of the word, but let it never be forgotten that within the presence of that man was God in person; or better, "a person" whose name was Jesus of Nazareth.

He Emptied Himself and Became Human

(Emptied Himself of His Lordship and became a Servant)

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in **Christ Jesus**, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but **emptied himself**, taking the form of a servant, **being born in the likeness of men**. And **being found in human form** he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:5-8).*

One of the most important concepts of the incarnation doctrine is found in this text. It is the expression "emptied himself." What is the meaning of this expression? Of what did he empty himself? And to what extent did he empty himself? These are the questions that have concerned theologians and biblical scholars for centuries. Some scholars (ancient and modern) have argued that what is implied here is that "the Word/*Logos*," who pre-existed as God, divested himself of the characteristics of his divine nature in order to become human. The characteristics of deity under consideration are those commonly called the metaphysical attributes (i.e., omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence); the only divine attributes found within him being the moral attributes (i.e., his holiness and goodness and those attributes flowing from these).

The problem of this interpretation is that of resolving how God in Christ could have emptied himself of himself (i.e., those attributes essential to his deity), in the absolute sense, and yet remained deity/God. A logical principle is at issue here; namely, *the whole of a thing is equal to the sum of its parts*. If some of the essential attributes of deity are gone, then is he yet deity? The answer to this problem, however, is found here in the Phil 2:4-11 text.

In the immediate context of Phil 2:5-7 the apostle Paul tell the reader what Christ emptied himself *in order to* experience human existence; i.e., his existence in the form of God, and his equality (Greek *isos* - sameness) with God. The text does not explicitly nor implicitly teach that he emptied himself of those attributes essential to his divinity; rather, what he emptied himself of was that which would have prohibited him from taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion (*schemati* - outward form, likeness, or nature) as a man, and experiencing humiliation and human death. In essence, what he emptied himself of was that which would have prevented him from fully experiencing the messianic role of the suffering servant, *viz*, the absolute expression of his divine lordship. According to this text, what he gave up in order to assume the role of suffering servant was the very identity and title (Lord/*Kurios*) he received in his resurrection from death and return to God (cf., Phil 2:8-11; Matt 28:18).

To return to the issue of the divine attributes intrinsic to deity, it is not the case that all the attributes of a divine being be active or manifest in order for them to be present within that being. A given attribute may be latent or dormant (i.e., at rest, inactive). The state of latency or dormancy of the metaphysical attributes here in question does not mean that they were absent; it only means that they were not functional or active. Christ was yet an eternal spiritual being, and within his divine being lay the powers intrinsic to the attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. The idea with which we are working here is, perhaps, better expressed in the following:

Only the form of God, the divine form of existence, consequently the transcendent divine majesty and sovereign power over all things, he exchanged, at his incarnation and during the time of his sojourn on earth, for his human form of existence. . . He veiled his royalty; he folded back, as it were, within himself those ineffable powers which belonged to him as free spirit in heaven. He went into captivity to himself, wrapping in weakness and forgetfulness his divine energies while he was a babe. 'Being found in fashion as a man,' he was subject to the gradual unfolding of his buried powers which

belongs to infancy and childhood. (M'Clintock and Strong, "Kenosis" in *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature*, pp 45-46.)

Assuming the role of a suffering servant, experiencing humiliation, human suffering and human death would have not been possible to God without the incarnation. Christ's experience of human existence was the same as all human beings experience. In his infancy and childhood one sees nothing more than the humanity of Jesus coming to adulthood. After his messianic anointing at his baptism, however, it is quite a different story. From this time forward he is changed. With authority and power he commands unclean spirits and they recognize him as the Son of God (Luke 4:33-36). It was not deity, however, he received at his baptism, he was deity already. It was his anointing as the Messiah he received and with this the awakening of certain of the divine powers intrinsic within him. These powers were evidence of the deity within him, but the "him" within whom deity dwelt was also human. Within him dwelt both deity and humanity, and with this we move to the next major texts of this discussion.

That Which Is Conceived in Her

*Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together **she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit**; and her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for **that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit**; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, **a virgin shall conceive and bear a son**, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us), (Matt 1:18-23).*

This text takes us into a discussion of the relationship of the incarnation to the miraculous conception of Jesus. It is in the

miraculous conception that the mystery of the unity between deity and humanity is revealed. To what extent was Jesus deity? To what extent was he human? How did these two natures become one in the incarnation? Did Jesus have two personalities? Did he have both a human spirit and a divine spirit? The answer to these questions is found in the miraculous conception.

Jesus did possess a divine and a human spirit, but the divine and human were not two separate entities (or personalities) within his being. The divine spirit of Jesus and his human spirit were one, and it took a miracle to bring about a total union of the two. Jesus is the only human who ever possessed a spirit that was both human and divine, and the two were made one by the miraculous conception.

In Hebrews 10:5 we read, "when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me." In human conception it is a living human body that is brought into existence through the fertilization of the female ovum by the male sperm. This is what happened in the conception of Jesus of Nazareth, and this text is applied by the biblical writer to this conception. The "me" for whom the living human body was prepared, however, existed before this miraculous conception occurred. Luke 1:31-35 gives the details of how this conception was accomplished. The angel of God explains to Mary:

*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called **the Son of the Most High**; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How shall this be, since I have no husband?" And the angel said to her, "**The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God,**" (Luke 1:31-35).*

The human female ovum was miraculously fertilized by "the power of the Most High." This act is referred to as "an overshadowing" (*episkiazo* - to cast a shadow upon). One can only

speculate as to how this metaphor is to be understood or comprehended. What we can know is that whatever happened, the result was the conception of the Son of God within the womb of the human female Jewess named Mary.

The offspring of a conception receives the characteristics of both the father and the mother producing that conception; so it was with Jesus. He received from his human mother his human characteristics, and from his divine Father he received his divine characteristics. His human body, soul, spirit, and all characteristics essential to full humanity, he received from his human mother; and from God came his eternal divine spirit with all the characteristics essential to deity. This is not to say, however, that Jesus possessed two separate spirits or personalities any more than anyone receives two separate sets of essential characteristics from a human father and mother. Rather, the characteristics of both progenitors became one in the offspring, as would be the case in any other conception.

In his conception and at his birth he possessed one spirit that was both human and divine; and at his death he gave up that same spirit, as is evidenced in the Gospel narratives (cf. Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37; Luke 23:46; John 19:30; cf. also James 2:26). His spirit was as much human as was the spirit of his Mother and his spirit was as much divine as was the Spirit of his Father. Jesus of Nazareth was as truly human as was Mary his mother from whom he received his human nature; and he was as truly divine as was God his Father from whom he eternally received his divine nature.

Here we are dealing with concepts so filled with wonder and intellectual challenge they shake us at the very foundation of our being. Such concepts as the incarnation of God, the miraculous conception of God, the coming of God into our world to share our existence by their very nature should be "soul shaking." What must be believed here is not only soul shaking but life transforming, and that belief centers in the fact that our God became "one of us" in order to become our savior. In the person Jesus of Nazareth God entered into human history and walked among us. This is a belief essential to the religion of Christianity, in the person Jesus of Nazareth God was

here, and because of this we can never be the same again.

MWLIII

Questions For Discussion

1. What do you understand by "the doctrine of the incarnation?"
2. Does this New Testament doctrine have an Old Testament basis?
3. What is the meaning of the expression, "the Word became flesh"? How do you understand the term "flesh"?
4. To what extent was Jesus truly "human"? How complete was his humanity?
5. What is the meaning of the expression, "he emptied himself"? Of what did he empty himself and to what extent did he empty himself?
6. What do the concepts of "lordship" and "servanthood" have to do with interpreting the Phil. 2:5-11 passage as relates to the statement, "he emptied himself"?
7. In what way is the New Testament doctrine of the miraculous conception of Jesus essential to our understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation?
8. How could Jesus have been both truly human and truly divine, are these not mutually exclusive categories of being?
9. Did Jesus possess two different spirits (i.e., a human spirit and a divine spirit) dwelling with a human body? How could his spirit have been both human and divine at one and the same time?
10. Is it not the case that such a teaching as the incarnation is so full or wonder that it is impossible for us to understand it? What must be known about a matter in order for it to be believable? What causes a matter to be unbelievable? Suggestion: If there is every good reason

to believe a thing, and no good reason to disbelieve it, then the rational person will believe rather than disbelieve; or else, why matter under consideration is unbelievable?