

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INCARNATION

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What does it mean to believe in the Incarnation?

Years ago, I was waiting for some repairs to be done in a local shop, and I struck up a conversation with an elderly man about his faith. “Are you a Christian?” I asked.

“I believe in Immanuel,” he said. “No one else. Just Immanuel.”

“Oh,” I said, “so you believe in Jesus?”

“I believe in Immanuel,” he said, more resolutely than before. “No one else.”

And try as might, I couldn’t get him past that statement of faith. To this day I don’t know if that meant he did or didn’t believe in Jesus.

Matthew is the Gospel writer who explains Jesus’ birth as fulfilling the prophecy in Isaiah that foretold a virgin would give birth to a son who would be called Immanuel—which, Matthew adds, means “God with us” (1:23).

This simple but profound reality—God with us—caused consternation to those who first encountered Jesus of Nazareth. Many people stumbled. How could an obscure man from Galilee, of all places, with dubious origins claim to be the Son of God? Even those who came to believe in Him did not always know how to explain the human-divine oneness in Jesus. Over the first several centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the doctrine of the Incarnation, probably more than any other doctrine, occupied church leaders. People from different backgrounds brought their various understandings of gods and humans, of the spiritual and the material, to bear on their explanation of who Jesus of Nazareth really was and is.

Some focused on His divinity and could not quite believe that God could become human and still be holy and pure.

Greek influence especially pushed these people to regard material reality as flawed, even evil; consequently, some explained that God’s Son only appeared to have a body. He could not really have been flesh and blood. The Apostle John addressed this heretical twist decisively: “Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God” (1 John 4:3). Denying the real humanity of Jesus cuts at crucial issues of faith which we will explore later.

Other people in those early centuries focused on the humanity of Jesus and could not bring themselves to believe that Jesus was eternal God. All material life has a beginning, they argued. Jesus had a conception and a birth. God lived in Him, they could believe, but since He was human, He was surely somewhere beneath the one true God—a lesser being, the highest of creation, but still creation, not Creator.

Various councils were held as new thinkers, converted philosophers, and strong church leaders brought their understanding to bear upon the issue of God and man in one person. The Apostles’ Creed had this to say about Jesus:

“I believe in God the Father... and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord: who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty, from whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.”

Notice that this creed focuses mostly on what Jesus did. After a couple of centuries of theological tug of war, when the Arian heresy¹ threatened to unravel the strong cord of orthodoxy, church leaders wove new wording into the Nicene Creed, in which they expanded considerably on who Jesus is:

I believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” [From there it continues much like the Apostles’ Creed.]

The Athanasian Creed, perhaps another two centuries later, expands even more. It begins with the Trinity:

“We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son and such is the Holy Spirit—the Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated; the Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible; the Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal. And yet they are not three eternals, but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible...” [The creed continues in this vein for some time, and then specifically addresses the Incarnation.]

“For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man—God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and made of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting, equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ; one, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God; one altogether, not by the confusion of substance, but by unity of person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ; who suffered for our salvation...” [And here it continues with what Jesus did for us, using wording similar to the Apostles’ Creed].

Much of our present understanding of Jesus rests upon this hard work of early leaders, guarding the true understanding against false beliefs.

And why, we may ask, is it so important to know and believe that in Jesus, God was “manifest in the flesh”? Here are a number of reflections on this great mystery:

1. The Incarnation demonstrates the love of God that “passes all understanding.” That God should love the world of humanity, not because we are so loveable, not because of anything we deserved, not because we asked Him or sought for Him, but because He is God and God is love, and that this love would move Him to become one of us—this is love beyond measure. We can hardly calculate the cost of God’s commitment to come among us. Writers and poets and musicians and artists have mused long and tried in countless ways to express the inexpressible love of God as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. As Jill Carattini states, “Standing over the precipices of the things that matter, nothing matters more than that there is a loving, forgiving, eager God who draws near [*italics in original*].”²²

2. The Incarnation demonstrates the humility of God. Jesus the eternal Son laid aside glory, took on the limitations of humanity, and was born in obscurity, poverty, and hardship even by human standards. The God who is omnipotent became a baby, completely dependent on others for His care. The God who is omniscient and omnipresent took on the limitations of time and space, and had the experience of “growing in wisdom.” The eternal glory, so overwhelming that no human can see it and live, took on the veil of flesh, a human form in which there was no outstanding beauty. This “laying aside” way of thinking and living has become the pattern for us. We are to have the “same mind,” to think and live in the same way. We do well to stare hard and meditate long at the scene of God’s infant Son laid in a feeding trough far from home.

3. The Incarnation validates the material creation and human life in particular. For God to take on “flesh and blood” and become like us, even calling us “brothers and sisters,” eating our food, blessing our children, and walking our roads, helps us to see that although the whole creation groans under the curse, still it was made by God and is not evil in itself. We ought therefore to look at food and trees and animals and ecosystems and especially humans with a sense of awe. All this was made by God! He pronounced it good. Physicality and materiality is still sustained by the word of God. Although a rogue system has arisen that is contrary to the righteousness of God—which we now refer to as “the world,”—the truth is that “This is my Father’s world!” It belongs to Him. The “god of this world” is an imposter. And with all creation we look for redemption, wherein all things will be made new.

4. The Incarnation marks the beginning of the redemption. Jesus lived among us as the dawn of the new age. The kingdom of God is “at hand,” He declared. He came among us as the new Adam. He taught us to live in the righteousness of the new order, although the world system is still operating by its dog-eat-dog and me-first habits of lust and pride. Love, Jesus said, is to be our most outstanding characteristic. Love for God. Love for family. Love for neighbors. Love even for enemies. Jesus touched the lepers. He fed the hungry. He cared for the downtrodden. He ate with sinners. He worked tirelessly to do good, to show compassion, to alleviate suffering, to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God. And He calls those who believe in Him to follow in His steps. We are to live even now in the ways of the restored system, though it may cost us our lives.

5. The Incarnation assures us that God is present in all that we face. To live in the ways of Jesus in this present system results in tension. Although Jesus’ followers participate in His life, receive His Holy Spirit, and thus experience already the beginnings of the new order, we do so in a world not yet redeemed. And consequently, we suffer. We constantly face the tensions of living generously in a world given to greed, of meeting injustice with kindness, of helping people who take advantage of our help, of looking for ways to bless those who speak and act disrespectfully to us. Early followers of Jesus took great comfort in knowing that Jesus, because He lived among us, fully understands these struggles and offers His presence and His grace to us. The writer to the Hebrews says Jesus was “made like us” so that He could “become a merciful and faithful High Priest.” He is “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” and “was in all points tempted like as we are,” and because of these human experiences, He “can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray.” These realities about Jesus comfort our hearts and assure us that He is fully able to give us exactly what we need in our distresses and trials.

Reflecting further on the Incarnation, Carattini says, “The Incarnation is the only story that touches every pain, every lost hope, every ounce of our guilt, every joy that ever matters. Where other creeds fail, Christmas, in essence, is about coming poor and weary, guilty and famished to the very scene in history where God reached down and touched the world by stepping into it... The great hope of the Incarnation is that God comes for us. God is aware and Christ is present, having come in flesh, and it changes everything [*italics in original*].”³

The Incarnation is truly a marvel. Jesus was fully man, and Jesus was fully God. So the elderly man who told me, “I believe in Immanuel” was making an amazing confession. God is with us! When we truly believe that God came among us, we are affirming profound truth. With the Apostle Paul, we can exclaim, “Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh!” (1 Timothy 3.16).

Endnotes

¹Arius was an early church leader (250-336) who taught that Jesus was a created entity, subordinate to God, and thus, unlike God, He had a beginning. Arius’s views were rejected as heretical at the Council at Nicaea in 325 AD.

²Carattini, Jill, “Incarnate,” Ravi Zacharias International Ministries, Daily Readings, December 4, 2013.

³Ibid.