

The Incarnation of Christ

The Meaning of the Incarnation

1. The Definition of the Incarnation:

The starting point for a discussion on the Incarnation is to define the term. The word *incarnation* simply means, "*in flesh*." Although the word *incarnation* does not appear in the Scripture, its components "*in*" and "*flesh*" do. The Apostle John wrote that the Word *became flesh* in John 1:14. The Apostle John also wrote of Jesus coming *in the flesh* in 1 John 4:2 and 2 John 7. The word *incarnation* denotes the act whereby the eternal Son of God took upon Himself an additional nature, humanity, through the virgin birth. The result is that Christ remains forever unblemished deity, which He has had from eternity past; but He also possesses true, sinless humanity in one person forever, the God-Man Christ Jesus (cf. John 1:14; Philippians 2:7-8).

2. The Terms used for the Incarnation:

Obviously, the coming into the world of human life on the part of one who is God and has existed for all eternity could not be expressed in the same way as it would be for ordinary human beings. Even though the Gospels use terms such as "born" and "conceive" in the narrative accounts, which deal with the birth of Christ, it is still true to observe that there is something quite different about His entrance into human life. Notice the other expressions used to speak of Christ's incarnation:

John 1:14, "*And **the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.***"

John 3:13, "*And no one has ascended into heaven, but **He who descended from heaven, {even} the Son of Man.***"

John 3:17, "*For God did not **send the Son into the world** to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.*"

John 6:51, "*I am the living bread that **came down out of heaven...***"

Romans 1:3, "*concerning His Son, who was **born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.***" (KJV says, *made of the seed of David*)

Galatians 4:4, "*But when the fulness of the time came, God **sent forth His Son, born of a woman...***"

1 Timothy 1:15. "*It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus **came into the world** to save sinners, among whom I am foremost {of all.}*"

1 Timothy 3:16, "*And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: He who was **revealed in the flesh, Was vindicated in the Spirit, Beheld by angels, Proclaimed among the nations, Believed on in the world, Taken up in glory.***"

Hebrews 2:9, "*But we do see Him **who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, {namely,} Jesus...***"

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Hebrews 2:14, "*Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same...*"

Hebrews 2:17, "*Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*"

Hebrews 10:5, "*Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, SACRIFICE AND OFFERING THOU HAST NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY THOU HAST PREPARED FOR ME.*"

Philippians 2:6-8, "*who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, {and} being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*"

The Predictions of the Incarnation

The Old Testament clearly predicts the incarnation of Christ. In fact several aspects of the incarnation are predicted in the Old Testament.

1. The Place of the Incarnation: Bethlehem in Judah.

Predicted in Micah 5:2, "*But as for you, **Bethlehem Ephrathah**, {Too} little to be among the clans of Judah, From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.*"

Fulfillment recorded in Luke 2:4-7, "*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called **Bethlehem**, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register, along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. And it came about that, while they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*"

2. The Manner of the Incarnation: A Virgin Birth.

Predicted in Isaiah 7:14, "*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a **virgin will be with child** and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*"

Fulfillment recorded in Luke 1:26-27, 30-31, "*Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee, called Nazareth, to a **virgin** engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the **virgin's** name was Mary... And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."*

3. The Lineage of the Incarnation: The Line of David.

Predicted in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, "*When your days are complete and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your **descendant after you, who will come forth from you**, and I will establish his kingdom. "He shall build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne*

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of his kingdom forever. "I will be a father to him and he will be a son to Me; when he commits iniquity, I will correct him with the rod of men and the strokes of the sons of men, but My lovingkindness shall not depart from him, as I took {it} away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. "And your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever."

Confirmed in the Genealogies of Jesus, (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38)

4. The Date of the Incarnation: Its General time frame.

*Daniel 9:24-25, "Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most holy {place}. "So you are to know and discern {that} from the issuing of a decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem **until Messiah the Prince** {there will be} **seven weeks and sixty-two weeks**; it will be built again, with plaza and moat, even in times of distress."*

The seventy weeks are weeks of years, which come to a total of 490 years. After the seven and sixty-two weeks of years or 483 years, Messiah will be cut off (killed). Since the weeks of years begin with the decree to rebuild Jerusalem, we can accurately discern when Messiah will be cut off. The decree occurred on Nisan 1 444 B.C. (about March 4, 444 BC), (Nehemiah 2:1-8). Taking 69 weeks of years and multiplying it by 7 years for each week and again multiplying it by 360 days in a prophetic year we get 173,880 days. Starting at Nisan 1, 444 BC and adding 173,880 days we come to the date of March 29, 33 AD, which can be concluded as the date of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the beginning of His passion week. While this does not give us an exact date of His incarnation, it does provide us with a general time frame.

The Means of the Incarnation

The *virgin birth* was the means whereby the incarnation took place and guaranteed the sinlessness of the Son of God.

1. The definition of the virgin birth:

This is that miraculous act whereby, Jesus Christ was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary with the result that the Second Person of the Triune God was joined eternally to a real human body and nature.

2. The clear prediction of the virgin birth in the Old Testament:

Isaiah 7:14, "*Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, a **virgin will be with child** and bear a son, and she will call His name Immanuel.*"

3. The careful record of the virgin birth in the New Testament:

Matthew 1:23 provides the commentary, indicating its fulfillment in the birth of Christ. Matthew 1:23 identifies Mary as a "virgin." The texts of Matthew and Luke are both clear on the teaching of the virgin birth. Matthew 1:18 emphasizes Mary was pregnant before she

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and Joseph were together; moreover the same verse indicates her pregnancy was due to the Holy Spirit. Matthew 1:22-23 stresses that the birth of Christ was in fulfillment of the prophecy of the virgin birth in Isaiah 7:14. Matthew 1:25 emphasizes that Mary remained a virgin until the birth of Christ. Luke 1:34 states that Mary had not had contact with a man, while in Luke 1:35 the angel explains to Mary that her pregnancy was due to the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit. [Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 222]

4. The confusion of the virgin birth:

The virgin birth of Christ should not be confused with the Roman Catholic doctrine of the immaculate conception. This refers to Mary's conception as holy and free from sin, which was declared by Pope Pius IX in 1854 and is in clear contradiction with the teaching of the Scriptures.

5. The importance of the virgin birth:

It demonstrates that God took the initiative in sending Christ.

It explains how the eternal God became fully man without ceasing to be God.

It guarantees the sinless nature of Christ.

It protects Mary's character.

It served as a sign of the uniqueness of the One who was born (i.e. God very God).

The Purposes of the Incarnation

Why did God send us His Son? What are the purposes for the incarnation? The Scriptures give several answers to this question.

1. To Fulfill the promises of God

Romans 15:18, "*For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers.*"

2. To Reveal God directly to mankind

John 1:18, "*No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.*"

3. To Provide an effective sacrifice for sin

1 John 3:5, "*And you know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.*"

4. To Provide an example for our lives

1 Peter 2:21, "*For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps.*"

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1 John 2:6, "*the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.*"

5. To Function as the ultimate High Priest

Hebrews 2:17-18, "*Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.*"

6. To Subjugate all to Himself

1 Corinthians 15:25, "*For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet.*" (Cf. Ephesians 1:9-10)

The Results of the Incarnation

1. **The Kenosis of Christ.** Christ voluntarily surrendered the independent exercise of His divine attributes.

A prevailing theological persuasion concerning the relationship between the divine and human natures of Jesus is the **Kenotic formula**.

The term Kenosis is taken from Philippians 2:7, where Paul states that Christ emptied himself when He took upon Himself the form of a bond servant. The Greek word KENAO translated "*emptied himself*," from which we take the English word *Kenosis* (a reference to the self-emptying of Jesus in His incarnation).

Note: There is much discussion as to precisely what that expression means; it is an issue, which must be addressed both exegetically and theologically. The basic issue is this: in what sense did Jesus "empty Himself" of deity when He took upon himself humanity. For our purposes here, it is sufficient to simply articulate the theological concept at stake.

The theological expression of the kenotic formula: During the period between His physical conception and His ascension to the Father, Jesus voluntarily surrendered the independent exercise of His divine attributes.

"The humiliation [of Christ], as the Scriptures seem to show consisted... in the act of preexistent Logos by which he gave up his divine glory with the Father, in order to take a servant form. In this act, he resigned *not the possession; nor yet entirely the use, but rather the independent exercise of the divine attributes.*" [A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p 703]

There is profound and inscrutable mystery in this, and there is no suggestion here that this formula solves that mystery. However, this formula does seem to honor what the Scriptures teach regarding the Person of Jesus. Notice specifically with reference to this suggested *formula*:

1-The formula does not suggest that Jesus surrendered deity; indeed, Jesus did not surrender any attributes of deity of any time.

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2-The self-emptying of Jesus, however it is understood, was voluntary (Philippians 2:7).

3-Jesus maintained His divine self-consciousness (He knew who He was) in this self-emptying (John 8:14; 19:97)

4-The teaching of Scripture is that when Jesus surrendered the independent exercise of His divine attributes, He surrendered them to the Holy Spirit (Mt 19:98; Ezekiel 4:14-18).

That is, in His incarnation and consequent humiliation, Jesus became totally subservient to the will of the Father; He became a perfect Servant, living to do the Father's will (John 8:28,29; 12:49). In thus submitting Himself to the Father, Jesus in His incarnation acquiesced entirely to the guidance, control and empowerment of the Holy Spirit (Ac 1:2; Luke 3:21,22; Ac 10:38; John 3:34)

This is not to suggest that Jesus was without the resident attributes of deity (the power to do miracles, for instance). He did not surrender the divine attributes themselves; He surrendered the independent exercise of those attributes (Isaiah 11:2; 61:1).

In fact, this construct does not solve the enigma of the relationship between the divine and human natures in the Theanthropic Person, Jesus Christ. (Indeed, that enigma cannot be solved.) It does, however, express the Biblical teaching concerning the self-emptying of Jesus Christ.

2. **The Humanity of Christ.** Christ took on Himself the additional nature of humanity.

The Importance of this doctrine:

Why is a proper and Biblical understanding of the doctrine of the humanity of Christ important to us today?

The apostle John makes this doctrine a test of orthodoxy:

1 John 4:2, "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that **Jesus Christ has come in the flesh** is from God.*"

It is because Jesus took upon Himself the nature of man that He can function as the Redeemer of man:

Hebrews 2:14, "*Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise **also partook of the same**, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.*"

It is because Jesus lived His earthly life within the limitations and restrictions of (un-fallen) humanity that He can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities:

Hebrews 4:15, "*For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as {we are, yet} without sin.*"

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Scriptural Proofs of this doctrine:

1-Jesus was called a man:

John 7:27, "However, we know where this **man** is from; but whenever the Christ may come, no one knows where He is from."

John 9:29, "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this **man**, we do not know where He is from."

Mark 2:7, "Why does this **man** speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?"

2-Jesus had a human body:

John 19:38, "After these things Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away **the body of Jesus**; and Pilate granted permission. So he came and took away **His body**."

Hebrews 10:5, "Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A **BODY** YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME."

3-Jesus possessed the immaterial aspects of humanity:

Matthew 26:38, "Then He said to them, "**My soul** is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.""

Acts 2:27, "BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON **MY SOUL** TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY."

4-Jesus was subjected to human limitations:

He got tired:

John 4:6, "and Jacob's well was there. So **Jesus, being wearied from His journey**, was sitting thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour."

He got thirsty:

John 4:7, "There came a woman of Samaria to draw water. Jesus said to her, "**Give Me a drink**."

He got hungry:

Matthew 4:2, "And after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, **He then became hungry**."

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He experienced emotion:

John 11:33-35, *"When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, **He was deeply moved in spirit and was troubled**, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to Him, "Lord, come and see." **Jesus wept.**"*

He got angry:

Matthew 21:12-13, *"And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all those who were buying and selling in the temple, and overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who were selling doves. And He said to them, "It is written, 'MY HOUSE SHALL BE CALLED A HOUSE OF PRAYER'; but you are making it a ROBBERS' DEN."*

He grew and matured as a man:

Luke 2:52, *" And Jesus kept **increasing in wisdom and stature**, and in favor with God and men."*

He was tempted as man:

Matthew 4:1ff, *"Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be **tempted by the devil...**"*

3. **The Hypostatic Union of Christ**. Christ now possesses both fully human and divine natures.

The concept of the Hypostatic Union (the union of the divine and human natures in the one person of Christ) is one of the most difficult concepts to comprehend in theology.

The Definition of the Hypostatic Union:

The Hypostatic Union is the unique combination of true humanity and undiminished deity that has existed since the incarnation. These two natures (divine and human) existed without confusion or loss of separate identity and they were inseparably united without transfer of attributes.

The Meaning of the Hypostatic Union:

The Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ came and took to Himself a human nature and remains forever undiminished deity and perfect humanity united in one person forever.

When Christ came, a Person came, not just a nature. He took on an additional nature, a human nature; He did not simply dwell in a human person. The result of the union of the two natures is the theanthropic Person (the God-man, Jesus Christ). [Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 227]

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The Explanation of the Hypostatic Union:

The two natures of Christ are inseparably united without mixture or loss of separate identity. He remains forever the God-man, fully God and fully man, two distinct natures in the one Person forever. Though Christ sometimes operated in the sphere of His humanity and in other cases in the sphere of His deity, in all cases what He did and what He was could be attributed to His one Person. Even though it is evident that there were two natures in Christ, he is never considered a dual personality. [Enns, p. 227]

A summary its elements:

Christ has two distinct natures: humanity and deity.

There is no mixture or intermingling of the two natures.

In Christ, the one person, the two natures are inseparably united without confusion.

This unity of the two natures is permanent.

Although He has two natures, Christ is one Person.

The False Historical Perspectives on the Hypostatic Union

Docetism:

In the late first century Marcion and the Gnostics taught that Christ only appeared to be a man. The apostle John referred to this false teaching in 1 John 4:1-3. This heresy undermines not only the reality of the Incarnation but also the validity of the Atonement and bodily resurrection. They denied the humanity of Christ.

Ebionism:

In the second century this heresy denied the deity of Christ, considering Jesus to be the natural son of Joseph and Mary but elected to be Son of God at His baptism when He was united with the eternal Christ.

Arianism:

A heresy that denied the eternality of Jesus as the Logos. Arius reasoned that since Jesus was begotten, He must have had a beginning. Arians held that the divine nature of Christ was similar to God, but not the same. The Council of Nicaea condemned this teaching in A. D. 325, affirming that Jesus had the same nature as God.

Apollinarianism:

Apollinarius, the younger sought to avoid undue separation of the natures of Christ. He taught that Christ had a human body and a human soul, but that He had the divine Logos instead of a human spirit (this assumes a trichotomous view of man). This Logos dominated the passive human body and soul. This was an error affecting the humanity of Christ.

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Nestorianism:

Nestorianism divided Christ into two persons. Nestorius explained that Jesus Christ was the form or appearance of the union of the two natures. The humanity had the form of Godhead bestowed on it, and the Deity took upon itself the form of a servant, the result being the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus in this view the two natures were separated, resulting in two persons. The teaching was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Eutychianism:

Eutyches (ca. 378-454) reacted against Nestorianism and taught that there was only one nature in Christ. This error is also known as monophysitism. The divine nature was not fully divine, nor was the human nature genuinely human, and the result was a mixed single nature. This was condemned at the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

[This section taken from Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, pp. 289-291]

The Orthodox Position Regarding The Hypostatic Union

The definitive creedal statement with reference to the relationship of the human and divine natures in the one Person of Jesus Christ is the Creed of Chalcedon, which declares that the two natures of Christ were united without mixture, without change, without division, and without separation.

Produced by the fourth ecumenical Council in AD 451, the Creed is a deliberate attempt to maintain an orthodox position in the face of a number of Christological heresies which had infected the Christian world by that time.

The following is the text of the Creed of Chalcedon:

The Creed of Chalcedon:

Following, then, the holy fathers, we unite in teaching all men to confess the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. This selfsame one is perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man, with a rational soul and a body. He is of the same reality as God as far as his deity is concerned and of the same reality as we ourselves as far as his humanness is concerned; thus like us in all respects, sin only excepted. Before time began he was begotten of the Father, in respect of his deity, and now in these "last days," for us and behalf of our salvation, this selfsame one was born of Mary the virgin, who is God-bearer in respect of his humanness. We also teach that we apprehend this one and only Christ-Son, Lord, only-begotten -- in two natures; and we do this without confusing the two natures, without transmuting one nature into the other, without dividing them into two separate categories, without contrasting them according to area or function. The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union. Instead, the "properties" of each nature are conserved and both

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natures concur in one "person" and in one reality (hypostasis). They are not divided or cut into two persons, but are together the one and only and only-begotten Word (Logos) of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus have the prophets of old testified; thus the Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us; thus the Symbol of Fathers (the Nicene Creed) has handed down to us.

THE HYPOSTATIC UNION A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:

Group	Time	Human Nature	Divine Nature	Church Council
Docetists	1st century	Denied-only an appearance of humanity	Affirmed	
Ebionites	2nd century	Affirmed	Denied-Jesus was natural son of Joseph and Mary	
Arians	4th century	Affirmed	Denied-Jesus not eternal; similar to, but not same as God	Condemned by Nicea, 325
Apollinarians	4th century	Divine Logos replaced human spirit	Affirmed	Condemned by Constantinople, 680
Nestorians	5th century	Christ was two persons		Condemned by Ephesus, 431
Eutychians	5th century	Not fully Human Not fully Divine Christ was a single mixed nature.		Condemned by Chalcedon 451

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Orthodoxy		Perfect Humanity	Full deity	Defined by Chalcedon 451
		Christ is one Person		

[Chart from Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 291]