

# **Incarnation: His Condescension and Eternal Union with Humanity**

## **Philippians 2:5-8**

**December 14 & 15, 2013**  
**Steve DeWitt**

This advent season at Bethel Church, we are digging down into what can be known in the midst of the mysteries of how the Son of God became a human; how the Lord of glory was born a baby in Bethlehem.

*Incarnation.* This is the word we use to describe it in summary fashion; it means the process of becoming flesh. This is John 1:14 (ESV), "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*" Only familiarity keeps us from astonishment at the thought. Last week we studied the virgin birth, or better, the virgin conception. Old Testament prophecy spoke of it. The angel Gabriel assured the virgin Mary. He reassured a troubled fiancé, Joseph.

The virgin birth was God's means whereby he united Jesus with a body without uniting Jesus with sin. His birth from a human assures us that he is human and his birth by a virgin reinforces the supernatural character of his person. But what did that produce?

### **What it Meant for the Son to Become a Human**

#### **Impoverishment – the selflessness of Christ**

This is the easiest one for us to understand in principle; the hardest to understand in reality. We cannot fathom the glorious experience of being the Son of God in eternity past. Here are some verses that describe it: "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.*" (2 Corinthians 8:9) The riches described here are not material riches, for material riches mean nothing in heaven. This is referring to the riches of divine experience; the riches of divine delight and joy; the riches of Trinitarian happiness in being God; the glory that was his as God.

It was this glorious experience that Jesus referred to in John 17:5, "*And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.*" His glory existed BEFORE the world began; pre-creation. In eternity past infinite glory was his. His experience of that glory was fullness. There was no weakness. No lacking. There was certainly no pain.

"*Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor.*" (2 Corinthians 8:9) How did Jesus become "poor"? Again, don't think materially. The focus is on the impoverishment of his experience as a human. To take on a human body and to experience human weakness, physical limitations, the breadth of human emotions toward him that we dislike such as mockery, betrayal, and torture, and of course, death itself.

The richest of all became the poorest of all. We tend to try and imagine this like the richest person in our world becoming a street kid in India—Bill Gates in rags in Mumbai. C.S. Lewis got closer when he wrote, "The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab." (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 179)

Any slug takers? Why would anyone do this? Jesus did it out of love and obedience to the will of God the Father and to save his people from their sins. For him, it was condescension and impoverishment. If there is any aspect of Christian teaching that historically was explosive, it is the nature of Jesus. Specifically....

### **Union – Two natures, one person**

At the core of the incarnation mystery is the second person of the Trinity becoming something that he had never been before. John 1:3 says, "*All things were made through him and without him was not any thing made that was made.*" It was his power and brilliance that spoke the universe into existence. God the Father purposed it. The Spirit of God energized it. But the Son of God was the agent doing it so we are right to say God created the heavens and the earth AND that Jesus made the heavens and the earth.

Creation includes human flesh, human bodies including all our nooks and crannies. Did he know when he made man that one day he would become one? Undoubtedly. It makes you wonder if as he made Adam's body out of the ground he may have thought, *Someday....*

Let's talk with some depth about *two natures, one person*. First, why is this confusing? We are one nature, one person people. One in one. I have one human nature and I am one person. Just to test this, does anyone have more than one body? Anyone wish they had another body? Anyone have more than one human nature? No. We are one in one. Two in one is strange.

This is where the declaration of the angel to Mary is so perplexing, "*Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.*" (Luke 1:35) What? We humans are sons and daughters of other humans. We have a human mom and a human dad. It's pretty simple and glorious to hear your child as I did this week say, "Dada!" (much to Mama's dismay). The Son of God was born to a woman with a full human nature and a full God nature as well?

*"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, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."* (Philippians 2:5-8)

This passage is part of Paul's overall appeal to the Philippians to humble themselves toward each other and to serve one another. Exhibit A? Jesus himself, who did not consider his place with God and equality with God as entitlements he was unwilling to lay aside. Rather, he divested himself of his rights and became a man.

Being human is all we have ever known. But in becoming human, Jesus became what he had not been before. In fact, a theology formulation says it very succinctly, "**Remaining what he was, he became what he was not.**" (Gregory of Naziansen)

That says it quite well. The man Jesus didn't become God. Jesus pre-existed as the Son of God; becoming human was the new thing. He became what he had not been without ceasing to be what he had always been. How did this happen? To understand this, we must understand how God uses unions.

## God and Union

### The Trinity is a union of three persons in one Godhead

We stumble on this one too. There are three persons of the Godhead, yet one God. This Trinitarian unity is so absolute that we rightly say, God is one and God is three.

### Humanity is the union of a material body and an immaterial soul

In Genesis 2, God formed us of the dust of the ground and breathed into Adam the breath of life and he became a living soul; material and immaterial. Look in the mirror and see a divinely crafted union. There is your body and yet we all know we are more than our body. Death reveals the unity of life in that death is the breaking of that union. Without the soul, the body is only a shell.

### Christians are in union with Christ and his eternal saving benefits

When the Bible says we are “in Christ,” what does that mean? It means that God has united the sinner with the redeeming work of Christ in such a way that God doesn’t see our sin, he sees Jesus.

There are many other places to see this including the beautiful creation. We have an amazingly diverse ecosystem with the full spectrum of color and sounds and biological interdependence. We see it in harmony, balance, even music, which may be the most remarkably beautiful example. But this is a message about Jesus.

### The Incarnation is the union of two natures in one person

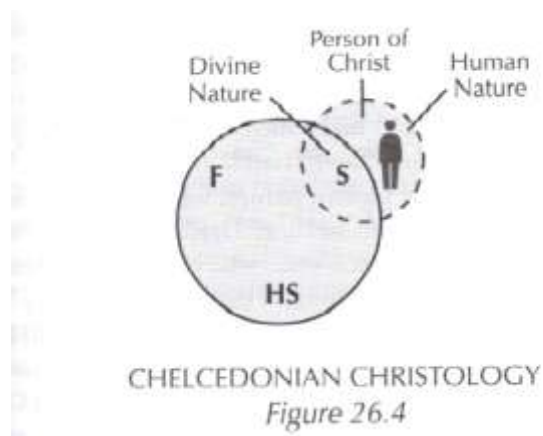
This union is the most wonderful of all unities God has ever done. On the surface it would seem impossible. Think of the essence of God, the essential attributes as he’s revealed himself. Let’s start with spiritual. God is spirit. God is not flesh. God had never been anything but spirit. God is omniscient—he has complete knowledge of everything. He is omnipotent—he has infinite power. He is omnipresent—he is everywhere all the time. He is eternal—he doesn’t live in time and space.

Then there is the matter of God’s glory, the effulgent light show expression of his infinite worth. If we just stopped there, it would be far easier to get Lake Michigan in a thimble than God in a man. Why? Man is so NOT what God is. We are different in key categories: we are limited in knowledge. We can be present in only one place at a time. We have limited strength, indeed, we are weak. We are stuck in time. There is no glory light bursting from us. God in man seems like an absurdity.

Here is the divine answer the angel told Mary, “*Nothing will be impossible with God.*” (Luke 1:37) The virgin conception was God’s means to create in Mary a completely human child with all that is essential to our nature and a completely divine child with all that is essential to God’s nature. Jesus was both very God of very God and very man of very man.

*The Westminster Confession of Faith* states, “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself; yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature.” Theologians call this *the hypostatic union*. We can simply call it mind-blowing.

Wayne Grudem (*Systematic Theology*, p. 557) has a graphic that illustrates this:



To avoid major heresies of the past, as we talk about two natures, the last portion is essential, one person. Jesus was not two people in one but two natures in one person.

In other words, DON'T think *Avatar*. A few years ago, the movie *Avatar* came out. It won all kinds of awards. Many people here probably saw it. The best summary I heard is that they should have named it, *Dances with Smurfs*. This is no endorsement of the movie or its underlying political agenda. The premise was that there was a planet that was discovered that had its own native people, Na'vi. Somehow a technology was developed that allowed a human consciousness to be inserted into a Na'vi body. That Na'vi body/human consciousness was an avatar. That is the mathematical opposite of incarnation: two bodies, one nature.

Jesus was no divine avatar. The real Jesus wasn't in heaven channeling consciousness to a human avatar body. Early church heresies thought this way and the church did too, until the council of Chalcedon in 451 struggled mightily with a fully God, fully man doctrine. Rather than trying to deviate from what Scripture teaches so it's more palatable, a better way forward is to marvel and worship Jesus for it.

"It is by far the most amazing miracle of the entire Bible – far more amazing than the resurrection and more amazing even than the creation of the universe. The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become man and join himself with a human nature forever, so that the infinite God became one person with finite man, will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe." (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 563.)

## Two Natures, One Person

### Explains paradoxes in Jesus' life

- "And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him." (Luke 2:40)
- "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52)
- "And after fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry." (Matthew 4:2)

- "Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour." (John 4:6)
- "After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), 'I thirst.'" (John 19:28)
- "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." (Matthew 24:36)

He's hungry, but elsewhere he miraculously feeds 5,000. He's thirsty but can turn water into wine. He grows in wisdom as a child yet shows divine knowledge. There is great mystery here but the answer to the mysteries and paradoxes is in a proper view of *two natures, one person*. In his humanity, he was weak, hungry, tired, even tempted. In his deity, he was the miracle worker. In his humanity, he died. His deity didn't die for it could not. The doctrine of the Incarnation and the hypostatic union preserves Jesus as one person. All he does he does as that one person. But it also allows for paradoxical moments, ones that are beyond our comprehension.

If we are uncomfortable with God doing something you can't understand, might that not say something about us? Christianity is filled with mysteries that we can't understand but then if we could, would there be much to be excited about or worship?

### **The Incarnation makes sense of everything else**

"The Incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery, but it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains." (J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, pp. 53-54)

The Incarnation is like a child who isn't sure if he likes something, but once he decides he likes the first bite, he eagerly eats the rest. The Incarnation is the first delicious truth, which if received, makes the whole gospel savory to us. It's a big first bite. It's not an easy bite. But once it is received by faith, the entire story of Jesus is easily received; the mission of Jesus to save us, the extraordinary life, the miracles, the teaching, the cross and resurrection, make sense. What else would you expect than resurrection if he was the God-man?

Of course, this is what is so hypocritical about Christmas in our culture. How do you celebrate a God-child in the manger and scoff at this same person doing miracles or being resurrected? Really? I'll give Christmas gifts to my children but then steer them away from the crazy Christian neighbors? If the child in the manger was God, then it is irrational to not follow the implications to their logical end. Jesus IS the Savior of the world.

This is the question for each of us. Who was it in that manger? A baby? More than a baby? We know what the angels thought and let's let their words be final here, "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" (Luke 2:10-11)

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.*

© 2013 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address ([www.bethelweb.org](http://www.bethelweb.org)) on the copied resource.