

BASIC BIBLE THEMES

SESSION 4: INCARNATION

by Sam Harris and Dean Nelson

Scripture Cited: Romans Mark 4:41; John 3:16; Romans 1:4; 9:5;
2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:16-17, 19;
Hebrews 2:14-17; 4:14-15; 7:24-25, 27

I was in eighth grade when I heard someone challenge the Incarnation for the first time. Nancy was a real livewire who usually played the class clown. However, on this Sunday before Christmas, she fired a sarcastic, penetrating shot right into the heart of the Christmas story. “What’s the big deal about God sending His ‘only’ Son into the world to die on a cross, anyway? He could always snap His fingers and make another one!”

The rest of us simpletons, including our poor teacher, sat there in stunned silence. No one knew what to say.

Oddly enough, Nancy’s cutting question has stuck with me all these years. Provocative encounters have that effect. It was my first serious experience with doubt and led to sincere questions about God and God’s way of doing things: Why did God have to send His Son? Could Nancy have a point, did it really cost God anything to send Jesus? After all, if He is all-powerful, doesn’t that imply He could have devised any number of ways to save us from sin? Surely He could have simply made a sweeping declaration that would have saved us all: “I hereby pronounce you all to be absolved of your sins!” That would have been easier. Why go to all the bother and fuss of coming to us in the form of a baby—of all things? Indeed, these questions go to the heart of one of the most important doctrines of Christianity—the Incarnation, God coming to us in the flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. So, why did God come to us in human form? Why did the Incarnation have to take place?

What Is the Incarnation?

The word “incarnation” means “enfleshment” or becoming flesh. In Christianity, it is the doctrine that

in the one person of Jesus, there is the union of human nature with the divine nature. This idea was agreed upon only after 125 years of intense debate in the Early Church. Eventually, this discussion culminated in a council the Early Church held at Chalcedon in 451 A.D. There, it was stated that in this union the two natures are united in one person but “without confusion . . . division . . . without separation.” One person, two natures—100 percent human and 100 percent divine.

Thus, the doctrine of the Incarnation carries with it the belief that God the Son assumed human nature, but without in any way ceasing to be God, and without sin (see John 1:17). God the Son was made human (became incarnate) by the Holy Spirit and was born of the Virgin Mary. Thus, the entire Godhead is involved: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But what about before His birth that first Christmas? Did the Son exist? Yes. Before His birth to Mary, He always was, begotten—not made—from eternity with respect to His deity (see John 1:1). Yet, in respect to His humanity, He was born through Mary, impregnated by the Holy Spirit. The result was not God changing His very nature into that of a human nature. Rather, it was the combining of both the divine nature and the human nature into one living person, Jesus Christ. Two natures, one person. It is vital to uphold this notion as we shall see. This has always been the teaching of the historic Christian faith.

How Can It Be Explained?

The Early Church went to great lengths to explain how two different natures could be found in one person. It took centuries for the Church, steeped in the Greek culture of logic and debate, to

carefully word the doctrine. They did this as a defense against heresy. It was vital to the survival of the faith to uphold the doctrine. However, regarding the mystery of the Incarnation, Martin Luther, the 16th century Reformer, stated, “Reason stumbles at this.... You are to believe, not to know and to understand, until the solution appears on the blessed Day of our redemption.”¹ Ultimately, it is a mystery. Indeed, there are more types of knowledge than merely measurable, observable facts.

The Scriptures are nearly silent as to the how of the Incarnation. The Gospel accounts merely say that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and she became pregnant (see Matthew 1:18, 25; Luke 1:34, 35). Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus. The Bible does not offer up exact scientific explanations as to how such mysteries take place. Rather, the Scriptures focus on the why of the Incarnation—God loved us so much that He became one of us. The Scriptures, then, spend more time looking at the life and works of Jesus, which clearly testify that He was indeed both human and divine.

Christ Was 100 Percent Human

When we look at Jesus in the Scriptures, we see a human being—just as human as you and me—a “being in very nature God...[yet a] being found in appearance as a man” (Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus was born, grew, matured, and developed into adulthood just as we do. He experienced all the processes that humans do. He knew what it was to hunger (see Matthew 4:1-4). He was familiar with the wrenching grief and emotional swirl of losing a loved one (see John 11:33-36). He had to learn obedience as we all do (see Hebrews 5:8). On and on the list goes: He enjoyed eating with friends, felt tired from walking long distances, became thirsty on hot days, and, of course, suffered the physical and emotional pain that came with dying a cruel death. There is no question that Jesus was human.

Jesus Was 100 Percent Divine

The Scriptures also portray the divine nature of Christ. Time after time, the Gospels record Jesus performing miracles that utterly defy human origin. He turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, made sick people instantly well again; healed those who could not walk, cured blindness; displayed absolute authority over the demonic world; raised

dead people back to life; manifested power over the forces of nature; multiplied food to feed huge crowds; saw into the inner, hidden motives of people; and much, much more.

As we read these actions of Jesus and ponder their meaning, we are compelled to ask along with the disciples, “Who is this?” (Mark 4:41). Who can do these things? He must be more than a mere man.

In fact, in nearly every account of Jesus’ extraordinary works, people are challenged to put their faith in Him. All the works of Jesus point beyond the miracles themselves to the One who performs them. Jesus does what only God can do. The miracles of Jesus are a means to an end and not an end in themselves. They are designed to evoke our faith in Him as the Son of God.

More Evidence

These works of Jesus certainly provide evidence for His deity, but there is more. Jesus also forgives sins, a power which can only be ascribed to God. He allows himself to receive the worship and adoration of others, something that from beginning to end in the Bible is reserved strictly for God.

Then there is the testimony of Jesus himself. Jesus, according to the Gospel of John in particular, understood His unity with God to be more than a unity of wills; it was a unity of essence. The Early Church certainly understood Jesus to be more than just a wise prophet or teacher. They attributed divine qualities to Jesus that in the rest of Scripture are reserved for God. A most notable passage is Philippians 2, an early hymn about the nature of Christ recorded by Paul: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (vv. 6-7). The passage goes on to attest that after His willing obedience led Him to die on the Cross, “God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name” so that “every tongue [will] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (vv. 9, 11).

There are many other passages in the New Testament that make reference to the divine nature of Christ, such as Romans 9:5. “Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!” And in Colossians 1, Paul said of Christ that “all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all

things hold together.... God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him” (vv. 16-17, 19). Still, it is in the resurrection of Christ that we find the most profound evidence of His deity.

The Early Church understood His resurrection from the dead to be the crowning achievement and supreme evidence of all His works and personal claims. Paul wrote to the Romans that Jesus “was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead” (Romans 1:4). Who else but God can conquer death?

Jesus was both human and divine. The Scriptures are consistent in that claim. But why is all this necessary?

Why Did God Choose Incarnation?

As my junior high friend Nancy asked, why couldn't God have done something much simpler and easier? Why didn't God just give us irrefutable proof of His existence so that we would all believe He is there? Why go to all the fuss of an incarnation? There are many possible answers to these questions, but we will discuss just three here.

First, God desired to communicate with us so much that He spoke in body language—He wanted us to see what He was like and not just hear about Him. Thus, the concern of the Scriptures is not to offer verifiable proof of His existence, but to offer us a picture of who God is. God communicates and reveals himself to us in the person of Jesus Christ. This is one reason why John the apostle refers to Jesus as “the Word” of God.

In the late Carl Sagan's novel, *Contact*, a radio signal from deep within the center of our galaxy has been received by astronomers. Dubbed “The Message,” its meaning cannot be deciphered, but it nonetheless sets off a firestorm of controversy around the globe. What does it mean? Is it a hoax? Could it be a message from God, or is it a portent of evil? A battle of words rages between evangelists and scientists over The Message's implication for the existence and role of God. Ellie, the lead character of the novel, is the skeptical scientist who discovers the signal and has this to say to the evangelists:

What I'm saying is, if God wanted to send us a message, and ancient writings were the only way He could think of doing it, He could have done a better job. And He hardly had to confine

himself to writings. Why isn't there a monster crucifix orbiting the earth? Why isn't the surface of the moon covered with the Ten Commandments? Why should God be so clear in the Bible and so obscure in the world? ... Why don't we see Him with crystal clarity? ... You've trapped yourself in some sort of fifth-century mania. Since then, the Renaissance has happened, the Enlightenment has appeared. Where've you been?²

Through the character Ellie, Carl Sagan, the late astronomer and noted atheist, raises the perennial question (and it is a good question): If God really wanted to reveal himself, why didn't He make it simple for us, observable to everyone at all times and in all places--measurable, repeatable, logical—so we could all believe and no one would doubt? Why, instead, did He choose to come in the form of a human baby two millennia in the distant past?

The question is more than one of merely believing in the existence of God. If that were the case, an orbiting crucifix may have done the trick. Still, what would an orbiting crucifix tell us about God? Is He kind or cruel? Is He personal or arbitrary? What is His will for us? And what would it tell us about ourselves? What is our destiny and purpose? What kind of people should we be? Where is the meaning for our lives we all so endlessly crave? Merely knowing God exists is far from adequate. We need more specific knowledge. So, God sent His Son Jesus to communicate to us who He is.

God does not accommodate us the way we think He should. A scientific, mathematically verifiable proof for God's existence is not what God desired. Rather, God chose to reveal himself to us, and His destiny for our lives as humans, in Jesus the Christ. In the person and works of Jesus, we see who God is and what He is like. We see His total commitment to those in need. In Jesus, we see His compassion for multitudes and individuals. In Him, we see God's unconditional love for us, His unrelenting pursuit of those who have gone their own way. Paul sums up the meaning of the person and work of Christ when he writes to the Corinthians, “Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The problem, then, is not with the Scriptures, but with us. We are like Sagan's character Ellie who has room for scientific knowledge only as she scoffs at the evangelists. We err when we attempt to squeeze the Scriptures and doctrine of the Incarnation into the preconceived mold of empirical science. Indeed, even today the notion of scientific "fact" is under vicious assault by scientists themselves! So, what is the scriptural meaning of the Incarnation? If it is not intended to offer us a scientific proof of God's existence, what are we to do with it? This leads us to our second answer.

Second, the Scriptures boldly state that in the person of Jesus, God has come to us to redeem us from our sins. God desires that we might enjoy fellowship with Him for all eternity. "For God so loved that world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). This is why God came in the person of Jesus. He came to provide our salvation.

Only the God-Man Jesus could do this. If Jesus were anything less than 100 percent divine, then God has not truly come to us. If Jesus was merely a man, then we may say that Jesus was a noble teacher, an exemplary model of love for us, but not worthy of our worship. He would have died a martyr for His own private cause, as so many others have throughout history. Yet, this is the very teaching being put forth by a host of scholars today, who, in their strictly scientific, historical approach to Jesus, have stripped Him of His divinity. They have reduced Jesus to being merely a "peasant sage." Yet, this conclusion can only be reached if we deny the authority of Scripture, discount nearly all of what Jesus claimed about himself, and ignore what the first Christians testified concerning Him.

Likewise, if Jesus was not fully divine, then God himself has not visited with us. God would still be remote and out of touch. If Jesus was less than divine, then God cannot identify with us, has not experienced our frailty, and has no firsthand knowledge of our suffering. The idea that Jesus was just a creation of God sent on a mission—something between God and humanity (like an angel, for instance)—would lead us to what the Early Church identified as a dangerous heresy called Arianism. As we have seen, however, the Scriptures affirm the divine nature of Christ. The writer to the Hebrews

states clearly that "we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God.... We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (4:14-15).

Earlier, the Hebrews writer affirms, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil.... For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest...and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (2:14,17).

Since He is 100 percent human, Jesus can adequately represent us before God as our mediator. Since He is 100 percent divine, He is able to forgive us of our sin and provide for us eternally. As the Hebrew writer puts it, "Because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need.... He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (7:24-25, 27). If Jesus were not fully human and fully divine, there would be no salvation for us before God.

Third, in the person of Jesus, we see what God originally intended for us, as humans, to be. In Jesus, we see human life as God originally intended it to be. Before the fall of Adam and Eve, we see them living in open and free relationship to God and to each other. There was mutual trust, transparent communication, meaningful work, and a notable lack of inner conflict of the will. However, the Fall brought an inhumane quality to all relationships. Distrust, suspicion, obstructed communication, and dishonesty characterize human relationships, even our relationship with God. There is a desire to cover up and protect our own self-interests above all others. Even our struggle to relate in a healthy way to our environment has its start in the Garden of Eden.

Still in Jesus, we see a picture of what it means to be truly human. In His person and works, we have a model of how to really live, of how we were originally designed by God to live. In Christ, we see open, free, and honest relationships before God

and others restored. In Jesus, we see exemplified the freedom to live according to truth in accordance with love. And in the atoning for our sins by the God-Man, we have more than just a model of how to live; we have the way opened for the power of God through the Holy Spirit to enable us to live that way.

That is why an orbiting crucifix or a mathematical proof simply will not do. God wants more for us—and from us—than mere intellectual knowledge of His existence. He wants us to fulfill His original and intended design for us. So, He came in the person of Jesus to redeem us, to model human life for us, and to empower us for that life. That is what the Incarnation is all about. That is why it is such a vital and nonnegotiable aspect of the Christian faith.

What Should Be Our Response?

While we feebly attempt to wrap our minds around scholarly explanations as to how God did it, the Scriptures choose, instead, to focus with clarity as to why God did it. He loves us. He wants us to be united with Him and He with us. In the Incarnation, and in accordance with the consistent teaching of the Early Church, God's ultimate goal is for us to be united with Him. God's highest desire is for us to be who we were originally created and intended to be—fully human beings whose sole and undivided desire is to please God. We are designed to find our direction and tasks in life as they flow out of our love relationship with God. God, who spared not His own Son for us, deserves nothing less than our full devotion, love, and undying worship. As Philip Yancy puts it, "Jesus embodies the promise of a God who will go to any length to get his family back."³

Notes:

1. Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life, Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (New York: Harper Collins, 1989), 98.
2. Carl Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Pocket Books, 1986), 164, 166.
3. Philip Yancey, "Unwrapping Jesus," *Christianity Today*, June 17, 1996, 34.