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Bridgeway Church / Foundations
Jesus Christ (1)

Jesus Christ: Why did He Come and What did He Accomplish?
Part One

The Incarnation and Humanity of Christ

Incarnation

A. *The Incarnation: A Definition*

What do we mean by the word "Incarnation"? The idea is found in several texts which speak of Jesus as "coming *in the flesh*" (1 Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 7), being "sent *in the flesh*" (Rom. 8:3), "appearing *in the flesh*" (1 Tim. 3:16); he also "suffered *in the flesh*" (1 Pt. 4:1), "died *in the flesh*" (1 Pt. 3:18), made peace by abolishing "*in the flesh* the enmity" (Eph. 2:15), and "made reconciliation *in the body of his flesh*" (Col. 1:21-22). In sum, "***the Word became flesh***" (John 1:14). Thus, by the *Incarnation* we mean that the eternal Word or second person of the Trinity became a man or assumed human flesh at a point in time, yet without ceasing to be God.

B. *John 1:14*

To understand the incarnation we must look at the contrasts between what is said of the Word in John 1:1 and what is said in 1:14.

v. 1	v. 14
The Word was	The Word became
The Word was with God	The Word dwelt among us
The Word was God	The Word became flesh

We need to focus on two words in v. 14: "flesh" and "became".

Flesh - John does not say simply that the Word became a *man* (although that's true). Nor does he say he became a *human*, or even that he took to himself a *body* (although both are again true). Rather, the Word became *flesh*. "Flesh" (*sarx*) is a strong, almost crude way of referring to human nature in its totality: true body, soul, spirit, will, emotions.

Became - The Word did not pretend to be a man or play at being human. The Word *became* flesh. The Word did not "beam down" in full bodily form. The Word did not enter into flesh, as if to suggest that there was a man, a human being, into which the Word made entrance. He doesn't say the Word "dwelled or abided in" human flesh.

Consider me: I *became* a student, a husband, a pastor, a father, etc. But this isn't what John is saying. What John means is that the eternal Word, God the Son, entered into this world by being born as a human being. Therefore, it isn't correct to say that *Jesus* has always existed or that *Jesus* was in the beginning with God (v. 1). The *Son of God* has always existed. The Second person of the Trinity, the Word, was in the beginning with God. But *Jesus* is the human name given to the second person of the Trinity when he took to himself flesh. The Word was never called *Jesus* until Joseph did so in obedience to the command of the angel in Mt. 1.

In summary:

- The doctrine of the Incarnation means that two distinct natures (divine and human) are united in one person: Jesus. Jesus is not two people (God and man). He is one person: the God-man. Jesus is not schizophrenic.

- When the Word became flesh he did not cease to be the Word. The Word veiled, hid, and voluntarily restricted the use of certain divine powers and prerogatives. But God cannot cease to be God. In other words, when the Word became flesh he did not commit divine suicide.
- When the Word *once* became flesh he became flesh *forever*. After his earthly life, death, and resurrection, Jesus did not divest himself of the flesh or cease to be a man. He is a man even now at the right hand of God the Father. He is also God. He will always be the God-man. See 1 Cor. 15:28; Col. 2:9; 1 John 2:7 (note use of present tense).
- Thus, we might envision Jesus saying: "I am now what I always was: God (or Word). I am now what I once was not: man (or flesh). I am now and forever will be both: the God-man."

C. *Other important texts*

Colossians 2:9 - Note three things: (a) "Bodily form" (*somatikos*) = a corporeal body; that body which he assumed in the incarnation, which is now glorified in heaven. (b) The verb "dwells" is in the present tense, thus emphasizing the permanence of the Word's assumption of human nature. The Word is and forever will be the God-man! (c) The God-man is not a secondary form of deity or in any way inferior in essence to God the Father or the Spirit: "*all the fullness of Deity dwells in Him.*"

Romans 8:3 - God sent his own Son *in the likeness of sinful flesh*. By *sinful flesh* he means fallen human nature. So what is the meaning of *likeness*? Some say Paul is undermining the reality of Christ's true humanity, perhaps suggesting that his flesh is only a facsimile of ours, but not the real thing. However, v. 8b ("in the flesh") indicates otherwise. Others argue the word *likeness* is Paul's way of saying that Jesus never committed an act of sin. But Paul is talking about character, not conduct.

The best solution is that Paul used *likeness* to avoid saying that Christ assumed **fallen** human nature. He took flesh like ours, because really flesh, but only *like* ours, not identical with it, because **unfallen**. He uses the word *likeness* because he feels compelled to use the phrase *sinful flesh* instead of merely *flesh*. Had he omitted *sinful* he also would have omitted *likeness*.

Hebrews 2:14 - Here we are told that Jesus "himself likewise also partook" of "blood and flesh", as explicit a reference to human nature as is found in the NT (cf. Eph. 6:12). The word translated "likewise" means in identical fashion, complete similarity, without any difference. How does this compare with Rom. 8:3? Note also that the author of Hebrews is careful to preserve the sinlessness of Jesus (4:15).

1 John 4:1-6 - Here we find that it is confession of the reality of the incarnation by which the Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist are discerned. The best translation indicates that the object of one's confession is: "Jesus" as "Christ come in the flesh." the confession is that the man Jesus of Nazareth is himself the incarnate Christ or Son.

The heretics whom John opposed in this epistle asserted that "Jesus" was merely a man upon the "Christ" descended at his baptism and from whom he departed before the crucifixion. Thus the heresy consisted of a denial of the permanent assumption of human nature by the eternal Son, the Word of God. John's point, then, is that Jesus of Nazareth is himself the Christ, the eternal Son of God, incarnate.

Humanity

A. *The Early Years of Jesus*

1. *Infancy and early childhood* (Luke 2:21-40) - Jesus would have been raised and educated as was any average Jewish child. His mother would have taken on this responsibility, focusing on the history of Israel and the tribe of Judah, as well as extensive Scriptural memorization. Aside from this we know nothing about his family life, except that there were at least eight members (Mt. 13:55-56).
2. *Boyhood of Jesus* - Beginning at age six and extending for five years, Jesus would have studied the Pentateuch, beginning with Leviticus

3. *The Youth of Jesus and his growing Messianic Consciousness* - At the age of twelve he was taken, according to Jewish custom, to Jerusalem (probably at the time of Passover). See Luke 2:41-52. His recognition that it was *his* Father's work in *his* Father's house is significant. The discussions with the Rabbis probably centered in the Passover and its meaning.

Students of the NT have pointed to two texts that may shed light on the age of Jesus at the time of his baptism. We are told in Luke 3:23 that Jesus "was about thirty years old" when he began his public ministry. Some have suggested that perhaps Luke used the round number thirty in order to draw a parallel between Jesus and David, whose kingship began at that age (2 Sam. 5:3-4; cf. also Joseph in Gen. 41:46 and Ezekiel in Ezek. 1:1). In John 8:57 we read that the Jews said to him, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Stein points out that "this should not be taken as an exact reference by Jesus' opponents to his actual age. The statement seeks rather to emphasize the difference between Jesus' age and the time of Abraham more than fifteen centuries earlier. How could Jesus and Abraham have known each other, as Jesus claimed (Jn. 8:56)? Fifty years is most probably a generous exaggeration of Jesus' age for the sake of argument. Even if Jesus was attributed an age older than he really was, the Jews argued that he could not have seen Abraham" (58).

In all likelihood, Jesus had to grow up fast. Most believe that Joseph died early, thus forcing Jesus to become the principal bread-winner and responsible head of the family. Whereas we read often of Mary during the ministry of Jesus, *Joseph* is nowhere to be found. "The reference to Jesus as 'the son of Mary' in Mark 6:3 is difficult to understand even if Joseph was dead, because usually a man was referred to as the son of his father. If Joseph were alive, however, such a reference would be virtually impossible to imagine" (Stein, 84). The most we can say, therefore, is that Joseph probably died sometime between the incident of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple and the inauguration of his public ministry.

B. *The Humanity of Jesus according to the Scriptures*

1. He had a true physical body - As noted above, the confession that Jesus was Christ come "in the flesh" became the touchstone of orthodoxy. See 1 John 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:16; Luke 24:39,43; Jn. 20:17,20,27. He *hungered* (Mt. 4:2), *thirsted* (Jn. 19:28), *grew weary* (Jn. 4:6), *wept and cried aloud* (Jn. 11:35; Lk. 19:41), *sighed* (Mk. 7:34), *groaned* (Mk. 8:12), *glared angrily* (Mk. 3:5), and felt *annoyance* (Mk. 10:14).

Did Jesus ever get sick? When he hit his thumb with a hammer while working in his father's carpenter shop, would he have been susceptible to getting an infection? Did Jesus ever get headaches from prolonged exposure to the hot Palestinian sun? Could Jesus have caught the flu from one of his family members? Could Jesus have suffered from a 24-hour stomach virus (nausea, vomiting, diarrhea) caused by drinking dirty water from the Jordan River?

2. He had a true immaterial soul - His soul was "overwhelmed with *sorrow* to the point of death" (Mt. 26:38). It was to the divine purpose that he subjected his *will* (Lk. 22:42).

3. He had a true immaterial spirit - It was into the Father's hands that he committed his *spirit* (Lk. 23:46).

4. He had a genuinely human emotional life - He *felt compassion* (Mt. 9:36; 20:34; Mk. 1:41; 6:34; 8:2; Lk. 7:13; *love* (Jn. 11:3; 15:8-12; Mk. 10:21); *anger* (Mk. 3:5; Jn. 2:13-17); and *joy* (Lk. 7:34; 10:21; Jn. 15:11; 17:13).

The Mystery of the Incarnation and Humanity of Jesus

The Word became flesh / God became human / the invisible became visible / the untouchable became touchable / eternal life experienced temporal death / the transcendent one descended and drew near / the unlimited became limited / the infinite became finite / the immutable became mutable / the unbreakable became fragile / spirit became matter / eternity entered time / the independent became dependent / the almighty became weak / the loved became the hated /

the exalted was humbled / glory was subjected to shame / fame turned into obscurity / from inexpressible joy to tears of unimaginable grief / from a throne to a cross / from ruler to being ruled / from power to weakness.

"The omnipotent, in one instant, made himself breakable. He who had been spirit became piercable. He who was larger than the universe became an embryo. And he who sustains the world with a word chose to be dependent upon the nourishment of a young girl. God as a fetus. Holiness sleeping in a womb. The creator of life being created. God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls and floated in the amniotic fluids of his mother" (Lucado, *God Came Near*, 25-6).

As Paul said in 1 Tim. 3:16, "great is the mystery of godliness: God was revealed in the flesh!"

Conception: God became a fertilized egg! An embryo. A fetus. God kicked Mary from within her womb!

Birth: God entered the world as a baby, amid the stench of manure and cobwebs and prickly hay in a stable. Mary cradled God in her arms. "He doesn't look like a Creator," she says to herself. Envision the newborn Jesus: misshaped head; wrinkled skin; red face. Just think: **angels watched as Mary changed God's diapers!** Tiny hands (that would touch/heal the sick and yet be ripped by nails); eyes (what color were they?); tiny feet (where would they take him? they, too, would be pierced by nails); she tickled his side (which would also be lanced with a spear).

Infancy: God learned to crawl, stand, walk; he spilt his milk and fell and hit his head.

Youth: was he uncoordinated? how well did he perform at sports? perhaps Jesus knew the pain of always being picked last when the kids chose up sides for a ballgame. God learned his ABC's!

Teenager: Jesus probably had pimples and body odor and bad breath. **God went through puberty!** His voice changed; he had to shave; girls probably had a crush on him and boys probably teased him. There were probably some foods he didn't like (Squash!). Could he sing? Maybe he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket!?

Carpenter: calloused hands; dealings with customers who tried to cheat him or complained about his work; how did he react when they shortchanged him?

Some think it irreverent to speak of Jesus this way. As Max Lucado has said,

"it's not something we like to do; it's uncomfortable. It is much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Clean the manure from around the manger. Wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose or hit his thumb with a hammer. He's easier to stomach that way. There is something about keeping him divine that keeps him distant, packaged, predictable. But don't do it. For heaven's sake, don't. Let him be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world. For only if we let him in can he pull us out" (26-7).

The marvel of it all is that he did it for you and me! It was an expression of the depths of his love for you that the Word entered the depths of human ugliness, human weakness, human humiliation. Again:

*he was conceived by the union of divine grace and human disgrace
the King of Kings sleeping in a cow-pen
the Creator of oceans and seas and rivers afloat in the womb of his mother
God sucking his thumb
the Alpha and Omega learning his ABC's
he who was once surrounded by the glorious stereophonic praise of adoring angels now hears the lowing
of cattle, the bleating of sheep, the stammering of bewildered shepherds
he who spoke the universe into being now coos and cries
omniscient Deity counting his toes
Mary playing "this little piggy went to market" on the toes of God
from the robes of eternal glory to the rags of swaddling clothes
the omnipresent spirit, whose being fills the galaxies, confined to the womb of a peasant girl
infinite power learning to crawl*

Mary playing "patty-cake" with the Lord of Lords!

Could Jesus Have Sinned? Or, was the Son of Man Impeccable?

This issue may best be illustrated by the use of four Latin phrases:

- *non posse non peccare* - "not able not to sin" (this describes unregenerate people and the fallen angels)
- *posse peccare* – "able to sin", and *posse non peccare* - "able not to sin" (these describe Adam before the fall, regenerate people, and Jesus, if one denies his impeccability)
- *non posse peccare* - "not able to sin" (this describes God, the saints in heaven and Jesus, if one affirms his impeccability); we could also include here *posse non peccare*, because if Jesus is unable to sin he is obviously also able not to sin

That Jesus did not sin is undeniable. The NT is clear concerning his sinlessness (see Luke 4:34; John 6:69; 8:46; 9:16; Acts 3:14; 4:27-30; Rom. 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26; 1 Peter 1:19; 2:22; 3:18; 1 John 3:5). But was his sinlessness because he *could* not sin or because he *would* not sin? Was he constitutionally *incapable* of sinning or merely volitionally *unwilling* to sin? To say that Jesus could have sinned, even though he did not, is to say he was peccable. To say that Jesus could not have sinned, and therefore didn't, is to say he was impeccable.

When he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, could he have succumbed? Was it possible for him *not* to have resisted? Those who deny impeccability answer yes to both questions. They base their argument on three points, only two of which, I believe, are valid:

First, if he could not sin, he was not truly human. After all, "to err is human." This argument is weak, for it is not necessary to human nature that one be capable of sinning. In heaven, having been glorified, the saints will be incapable of sinning, but they will not for that reason be inhuman.

Second, if Jesus could not have sinned, he was not genuinely tempted. True temptation requires the possibility of sinning. That he refused to yield to Satan's temptations no one denies. But yielding must have been *possible* or the encounter was a sham.

Third, the doctrine of impeccability is based on the assumption that Jesus resisted the devil from the strength of his divine nature. But, as we shall later see, this is highly questionable. I believe Jesus lived and ministered as a **human dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit**. As a human, the possibility existed that he *could* have sinned, but by virtue of his unceasing reliance on the power of the Holy Spirit he *did not* sin.

It would appear, then, that Jesus is to be conceived as having lived in much the condition of Adam prior to the latter's fall. More on this later.

Discussion Questions

- (1) How important is the doctrine of the Incarnation? Can someone deny it and still be considered a Christian? If not, why not?
- (2) Of what practical importance to you personally is the truth that Jesus was fully human? How does this help you in your daily battle with sin and temptation? Was it necessary for Jesus to be fully human in order to save us? Why?
- (3) Why doesn't the full humanity of Jesus detract from or undermine his full deity? How can he be both at the same time?
- (4) What is your opinion on the debate as to whether Jesus could have sinned? Defend your position.
- (5) What if Jesus had actually sinned? Discuss the implications of this for our salvation.