



INCARNATION: GOD COMES

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INCARNATION: GOD COMES

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:14

Superheroes capture our imagination with their superhuman abilities. Wolverine can rapidly heal from injury. Invisible Woman can become invisible at will. Nitro can reform his own body after it explodes. Superman can fly. The Hulk has superhuman power. Aquaman can breathe underwater. Spiderman can climb walls. Wonder Woman can understand any language. Infinity is all-knowing. The Silver Surfer can manipulate gravity. Doomsday can resurrect from death. Kitty Pryde can pass through solid matter. And the Flash has superhuman speed.

Many children, and more than a few adults, have wondered what it would be like for a human being to have superhuman abilities. Yet Christian theology has something even more amazing because, unlike the superheroes, our Superhero truly lived, and his powers exceed those of comic book lore.

In Jesus, God enters the human realm. He turns water into wine and turns a boy's lunch into thousands of meals, walks on water, calms storms, heals the sick, raises the dead, commands the demonic, and conquers the grave.

J. I. Packer has described the incarnation as the "supreme mystery" associated with the gospel.¹ The incarnation is more of a miracle than the resurrection because in it somehow a holy God and sinful humanity are joined, yet without the presence of sin: "Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation."²

WHAT DOES INCARNATION MEAN?

Incarnation (from the Latin meaning "becoming flesh") is the word theologians use to explain how the second member of the Trinity entered into human history in flesh as the God-man Jesus Christ. One prominent theological journal explains:

The English word "incarnation" is based on the Latin Vulgate, "Et verbum caro factum est." The noun caro is from the root

DOCTRINE

carn- ("flesh"). The Incarnation means that the eternal Son of God became "flesh," that is, He assumed an additional nature, namely, a human nature.³

The incarnation is expressly stated in John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." To better understand the incarnation, we must carefully consider the opening chapter of John's Gospel.

The Hebrew people, at the end of the first century, clung tightly to their proud religious heritage extending from Abraham to Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, and a host of priests and prophets. At the center of their theology was a devotion to the Word of God. The sacred Scriptures of the Old Testament were penned in their native tongue by their Hebrew brothers with nothing less than the authority of God as his divine voice through appointed men. To the Hebrews, the Word of God was the presence and action of God breaking into human history with unparalleled power and authority. God's Word indicated action, an agent accomplishing the will of God. Some examples include God bringing things into existence by His word^a and God's word being sent out to accomplish His purposes.^b For the Hebrew, God's speech and action were one in the same.

Leon Morris provides insight into the Jewish concept of "the Word" from the Jewish Targums (Old Testament paraphrases), in which Jews substituted "God" for "the Word of God" out of reverence for His name. For example, where the Bible says, "Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God,"^c the Targum reads, "to meet the Word of God."⁴

The Jewish philosopher and historian Philo taught his misunderstanding of the logos. Dualistic and much like early Gnostics, Philo taught that God is spirit and good, but that all matter is evil. Therefore, God could not have created or taken on the material lest He sin. He concluded that both God and matter are eternal and that an intermediary existed that permitted God to interact with the material world. This he called the logos.

^a Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24; Ps. 33:6

^b Isa. 55:11

^c Ex. 19:17

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

The Greek people living at the end of the first century also clung tightly to their proud heritage, a philosophical heritage extending from Heraclitus (540–480 BC), to Socrates (470–399 BC), Plato (428–348 BC), Aristotle (384–327 BC), Cicero (106–43 BC), and a host of other philosophers, poets, and playwrights. At the fountainhead of Greek philosophy was Heraclitus, who was known as the “weeping philosopher” and whose image could be found on the coins in Ephesus for several centuries following his death.

For Heraclitus, the creation of the world, the ordering of all life, and the immortality of the human soul were all made possible solely by the word (or logos) that was the invisible and intelligent force behind all that we see in this world. Also, it was the word through which all things were interrelated and brought into harmony, such as life and death, good and evil, darkness and light, and the gods and people. He went so far as to say that truth could be known and wisdom, the great aim of Greek existence, found not by a knowledge of many things but instead by a deep and clear awareness of one thing—the word, or logos.

Jesus Christ was born of a virgin as the one true God who became a man, living at a time and place in which the Hebrew and Greek worlds collided. John sought to be a faithful missionary to the Greeks and to remain loyal to the Hebrew Old Testament Scriptures, by seeking to present the gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully to the larger world dominated by Greek philosophy and language. In this context, John wrote his biography of Jesus in the Greek language, and he began with the concept of “the word,” a common ground in the presuppositions of both Hebrew theology and Greek philosophy. Logos is from the Greek meaning “word,” or “reason.” As we have seen, it was used by the ancient Greeks to convey the idea that the world was governed by a universal intelligence. However, John used logos differently from other writers, that is, to refer to the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ.

John begins with a declaration that both Hebrews and Greeks would have agreed with, that before the creation of the world and time, the Word existed eternally. He then scandalizes both groups by stating that Jesus is the Word and was with the one and only God and, in fact, was Himself God and was face-to-face with God

DOCTRINE

the Father from eternity.^a This thundering declaration would have been stunning to both Jews and Greeks who had vigorously argued that a man could never become a god, though they may never have considered that God had become a man, as John's eyewitness testimony revealed.

John then explains that the Word is not merely the invisible force of the Greeks or the agent of God's action for the Hebrews, but a person through whom all things were created^b, and a person in whom is life and light for mankind.^c This light that exposes sin and reveals God has come into the darkness of this sinful, cursed, and dying world. The darkness opposed His light but was unable to understand or overcome Him.^d

It is important to note that John was fully monotheistic in his understanding of God.⁵ He would have understood the magnitude of what he was saying, and, as a result, he very clearly outlined his position. John was acutely aware of and intentional in his revolutionary teaching regarding five aspects of this Logos.

- 1) The Logos is eternal.^e According to Ron Rhodes, "'In the beginning' (Gk. en archei) refers to a point in eternity past beyond which it is impossible for us to go. Moreover, the verb was ('in the beginning was the Word') is an imperfect tense in the Greek, indicating continued existence."⁶
- 2) The Logos has always been with God, face-to-face with the Father as an equal in relationship.^f
- 3) The Logos is a person distinct from, yet equal to, God.^g The Greek preposition pros (translated "with" in 1 John 1:1 and 1:2) implies two distinct persons. Therefore, while the Father and the Logos are not the same, they do belong together as

^a John 1:1-2

^b John 1:3; cf. Col. 1:16

^c John 1:4

^d John 1:5; cf. 1 John 1:5-10; 2:8-11

^e John 1:1-2

^f John 1:1-2

^g John 1:1-2

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

one.

- 4) The Logos is the creator^a and therefore eternal, self-existent, and all-powerful.
- 5) The Logos became flesh.^b In refutation to the Gnostics and dualistic teachings of Philo, John clearly taught that matter is not inherently evil and that God does involve Himself with the material. It is also noteworthy that Jesus came to dwell among His people in a way that is similar to the tabernacle that God had the Israelites build as His sanctuary so that He might dwell in their midst.^c Implicitly, we are told that the Logos that was present in the sanctuary became physically present in the space-and-time world. As George Eldon Ladd observes, the Logos became flesh to reveal to humans five things: life^d, light^e, grace^f, truth^g, glory^h, and even God himself.⁷

How John uses the word Logos elsewhere in his writings is also insightful. First John 1:1 indicates that John and others heard, saw, and touched the Logos, “which was from the beginning.” Again, this is a clear reference to Jesus Christ. Revelation 19:12–13 also pictures Christ as the conquering warrior, the Logos of God.

In summary, the Logos is one of the strongest arguments for the deity of Jesus as the personal, eternally existing Creator of the universe, distinct from yet equal with God the Father, who became incarnate (or came in the flesh) to demonstrate His glory in grace and truth to reveal life and light to men.

^a John 1:3

^b John 1:14

^c Ex. 25:8

^d John 1:4

^e 1 John 1:4–5

^f John 1:14

^g *Ibid.*

^h *Ibid.*

HOW DID PEOPLE KNOW GOD WAS COMING?

Because God is sovereign over the future, He alone is capable of giving prophetic insight into the future. In great mercy, He did this for His people in the Old Testament. He detailed for them who was coming to save them, how He would come, where He would come, when He would come, and why He would come, so that they would anticipate the incarnation and salvation of Jesus Christ.

After Adam and Eve sinned, God prophesied to them that the Messiah (Jesus) would be born of a woman; He makes no reference to a father. This notable omission makes one wonder and points toward his virgin birth. This prophecy was given by God Himself and was the first time the gospel was preached: "I will put enmity between you [the Serpent] and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."^a

Around 700 BC, Isaiah prophesied exactly how Jesus would come into human history: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."^b The promise that Jesus' mother would be a virgin who conceived by a miracle did, in fact, come true.^c Jesus' mother, Mary, was a godly young woman and chaste virgin who conceived by the miraculous power of God the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, Jesus, a name that means "he saves his people from their sins," came as "Immanuel," which means, "God is with us." God became a man at the incarnation of Jesus. Matthew 1:22–23 reveals that Isaiah's prophecy came true: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."

Some contend that the prophecy in Isaiah does not refer to a virgin. They argue that the Hebrew word 'almah' (which is used in Isaiah 7:14) typically means "young woman," not "virgin," whereas the Hebrew word *bethulah* typically means "virgin." However, there

^a Gen. 3:15

^b Isa. 7:14

^c E.g., Matt. 1:18–23

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

are many reasons why the verse should be read as referring to a virgin.

The word does mean a “marriageable girl” or “young woman.” But that would also mean that she was a virgin because in that day, young women were virgins. Fathers and the community protected these young women. Anyone engaged in sexual relations outside marriage were subject to possible death under the law. If there was any question about her virginity, a woman was subject to physical inspection, which we see in Deuteronomy 22:14–22.

Additionally, the word ‘*almah*’ is used elsewhere in the Old Testament to refer specifically to a young virgin woman. One clear example is Rebekah, who is described as “very attractive in appearance, a maiden [*bethulah*] whom no man had ever known.”^a Further in the chapter we read that Rebekah was a “virgin [*almah*].”^b While the two words are virtually synonymous, apparently *bethulah* required a bit more clarification that the woman was a virgin whereas ‘*almah*’ did not. Furthermore, two centuries before Jesus was born, we find that the Jews understood exactly what ‘*almah*’ means: the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, translates ‘*almah*’ as *parthenos*, which unambiguously means “virgin”. Lastly, in the New Testament, Isaiah 7:14 is clearly interpreted as a prophetic promise about the birth of Jesus to Mary, who was both a young woman and a virgin.

Concerning Jesus’ birthplace, in roughly 700 BC, Micah prophesied that Jesus would be born in the town of Bethlehem, saying, “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”^c D. A. Carson says that this verse reveals that the incarnation of Jesus was the entrance of the eternal God: “The Hebrew behind from ancient means from ‘the remotest times,’ ‘from time immemorial’...when used with reference to some historical event; when it is used of God, who existed before creation, ‘everlasting’ is an appropriate translation (e.g. Ps. 90:2).”⁸

^a Gen. 24:16

^b Gen. 24:43

^c Mic. 5:2

DOCTRINE

This prophecy was fulfilled in Luke 2:1–7. Caesar Augustus had called for a census to be taken, which required that every family register in their hometown. Jesus’ adoptive father, Joseph, was thus required to return to Bethlehem because he was a descendant of the family line of David. In God’s providence, this census was required right when Mary was pregnant; she journeyed with her husband from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem so that Jesus was born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of Micah’s prophecy.

As to the timing of Jesus’ incarnation, in 400 BC Malachi prophesied, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”^a The messenger of whom Malachi spoke was John the Baptizer, who prepared the way for Jesus’ incarnation to bring the new covenant, and the Lord he speaks of is the Lord Jesus Christ. It is important that we are told that Jesus would come to “his temple.” Since the temple was destroyed in AD 70 and has not existed since, this places the incarnation of Jesus Christ prior to AD 70. Practically, this means that our Jewish friends who are still awaiting the coming of their Messiah missed him; they wait in vain because he has already come to his temple and brought the new covenant of salvation.^b

Lastly, Isaiah prophesies in 700 BC about why Jesus would become incarnate—He is God’s arm of salvation reaching down to save sinners.^c Isaiah also says that Jesus would come from humble circumstances and suffer great sorrow and grief by men in order to deal with the human sin problem through His death, burial in a rich man’s tomb, and resurrection.^d The purpose of Jesus’ incarnation was fulfilled when, just as promised, He suffered and died in the place of sinners, though He Himself was sinless, was buried in a rich man’s tomb, and rose from death to make righteous the unrighteous.^e

^a Mal. 3:1

^b Luke 2:25–27

^c Isa. 53:1–12

^d Isa. 52:13–53:12

^e Matt. 27:38, 57–60; Luke 23–24; Acts 2:25–32

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

Besides these explicit prophecies predicting Jesus' incarnation, on many occasions the Old Testament speaks of God anthropomorphically, or in human terms. Old Testament scholar Roy Zuck says:

Deuteronomy refers to God's hand (2:15; 3:24; 4:34; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8; 33:11; 34:12) and arm (4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:8) as expressions of His power. His eyes (11:12; 12:28; 13:18; 32:10) represent His omniscience and constant attention, while His face (5:4; 31:18; 33:20; 34:10) and mouth suggest His communication of His glory and word. In fact the "mouth" of Yahweh is a metonymy for His word as propositional revelation (1:26, 43; 8:3; 9:23; 17:6, 10-11; 19:15; 21:17; 34:4). In startlingly human terms Yahweh is said to write (10:4), to walk (23:14), and to ride (33:26).⁹

Jacob Neusner is the most respected scholar of Judaism, and his book "The Incarnation of God" examines the notion of divine incarnation as it emerges in rabbinic literature.¹⁰ Neusner is so aware of the force of the anthropomorphisms in Hebrew Scripture that he actually calls them incarnational.¹¹ He defines incarnational as "the representation of God in the flesh, as corporeal, consubstantial in emotion and virtue with human beings, and sharing in the modes and means of action carried out by mortals."¹² Neusner goes on to say:

God's physical traits and attributes are represented as identical to those of a human being. That is why the character of the divinity may accurately be represented as incarnational: God in the flesh, God represented as a person consubstantial in indicative physical traits with the human being.¹³

He argues that some earlier rabbis held to a doctrine of incarnation; he is fully aware of the theological connections this has for Christianity, despite the fact that he is Jewish, because he sees that the biblical evidence of the Old Testament leads to the incarnation.

In summary, people knew of Jesus' incarnation in advance because God prophetically revealed to them who would come,

where he would come, when he would come, and why he would come.

HOW DID GOD COME INTO HUMAN HISTORY?

Before we examine how the incarnation occurred, we will note some important truths about this doctrine, for the sake of precision.

First, the incarnation is not an idea borrowed from pagan mythology. In mythology there are stories such as Zeus begetting Hercules, and Apollo begetting Ion and Pythagoras. As a result, some have speculated that Christians stole the virgin birth story from such myths. This speculation must be rejected on three grounds.

(1) Some such myths came after the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 and therefore could not have been the origination of the story. (2) The myths speak of gods having sex with women, which is not what the virgin birth account entails. (3) The myths do not involve actual human beings like Mary and Jesus but rather fictional characters similar to our modern-day superheroes in the comics.

A contemporary account of the “virgin birth” of Augustus was told in the days when Jesus was born.

“When Atia had come in the middle of the night to the solemn service of Apollo, she had her litter set down in the temple and fell asleep, while the rest of the matrons also slept. On a sudden a serpent glided up to her and shortly went away. When she awoke, she purified herself, as if after the embraces of her husband, and at once there appeared on her body a mark in colors like a serpent, and she could never get rid of it; so that presently she ceased ever to go to the public baths. In the tenth month after that Augustus was born and was therefore regarded as the son of Apollo.”¹⁴

Even the briefest glance shows how different this account is from God’s miraculous working in the womb of Mary to beget the God-man, Jesus, who is Emanuel the Messiah.

Second, the Mormon teaching that God the Father had physical, flesh-and-bone sexual relations with Mary, thereby enabling her to conceive Jesus, is horrendously incorrect.

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

Third, the incarnation does not teach that a man became God. From the time the Serpent told our parents, "You will be like God",^a there has been an ongoing demonic false teaching that we can be gods (e.g., Mormonism) or part of God (e.g., pantheism, panentheism, and New Ageism). Simply, the incarnation teaches the exact opposite, namely that God became a man.

Fourth, the second member of the Trinity did not come into existence at the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Rather, the eternal Son of God became the God-man Jesus Christ. Theologian Martyn Lloyd-Jones says it this way:

"The doctrine of the incarnation at once tells us that that is not what happened. A person, we repeat, did not come into being there. This person was the eternal Person, the second Person in the Trinity. When a husband and a wife come together and a child is born a new person, a new personality, comes into being. That did not happen in the incarnation."¹⁵

Fifth, while it is true in one sense that God did become a man, we must be careful to note that the second divine person in the Trinity became a man and that the entire Trinity did not incarnate as a human being. Lloyd-Jones explains:

"But to me it seems always to be wise not to say that God became man. That is a loose statement which we had better not use. We often do say that, but believing as we do in the Persons of the Trinity, what we should say is that the second Person in the Trinity was made flesh and appeared as man. If we merely say, 'God became man', then we may be saying something that is quite wrong, and if people believe something wrong as the result of our statement, we cannot really blame them. We must be particular and we must be specific and we should always be careful what we say...Jesus Christ has not been changed into a man; it is this eternal Person who has come in the flesh. That is the right way to put it."¹⁶

^a Gen. 3:5

DOCTRINE

Therefore, by incarnation we mean that the eternal second person of the Trinity entered into history as the man Jesus Christ.

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is recorded in detail in the first two chapters of both Matthew's and Luke's Gospels. There we read that the angel Gabriel was sent as a messenger from God to the town of Nazareth to a young virgin named Mary who was betrothed to a man named Joseph. The angel announced:

"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 call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God...For nothing will be impossible with God." And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Further, the Bible reveals the birth of Jesus as the pattern for our new birth—both are miracles of God the Holy Spirit to be received by faith. Belief in Jesus' incarnation is an essential truth that Christians have always held. One scholar says, "Apart from the Ebionites...and a few Gnostic sects, no body of Christians in early times is known to have existed who did not accept as part of their faith the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary."¹⁷ Another writes, "Everything that we know of the dogmatics of the early part of the second century agrees with the belief that at that period the virginity of Mary was a part of the formulated Christian belief."¹⁸ Furthermore, the church father Ignatius, who was trained by the disciple John, testified to this fact, speaking of the "virginity of Mary."¹⁹ Lastly, J. Gresham Machen summarized the evidence for

^o Luke 1:30–38

that fact, saying, "There is good ground, we think, to hold that the reason why the Christian Church came to believe in the birth of Jesus without a human father was simply that He was a matter of fact so born."²⁰

WAS JESUS FULLY GOD?

Jesus is nearly universally recognized as a great moral example, insightful teacher, defender of the poor and marginalized, humble servant to the needy, and unprecedented champion of overturning injustice with nonviolence. However, the divinity of Jesus Christ is most frequently and heatedly debated. Simply stated, the question as to whether Jesus Christ is fully God is the issue that divides Christianity from all other religions and spiritualities. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses Watchtower Society says, "Jesus never claimed to be God."²¹ Bahá'ís say that Jesus was a manifestation of God and a prophet but inferior to Muhammad and Bahá'ulláh. Buddhism teaches that Jesus was not God but rather an enlightened man like the Buddha. Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy flatly states, "Jesus Christ is not God." Conversely, we believe that there are numerous incontrovertible reasons to believe that Jesus Christ was and is fully God. God the Father said Jesus was God. The Bible is clear that the Father declares the Son to be God. In Hebrews 1:8 the Father speaks of the Son as God, saying, "But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" When Jesus is brought forth out of the water at his baptism, God the Father says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."^a

At Jesus' transfiguration, "a voice from the cloud said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.'"^b Indeed, there can be no greater testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ than that of God the Father.

Demons said Jesus was God. Even demons called Jesus "the

^a Matt. 3:17

^b Matt 17:5

DOCTRINE

Holy One of God”^a and “the Son of God.”^b Mark 1:34 says that Jesus “would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” Again, Luke 4:41 says Jesus “would not allow them [the demons] to speak, because they knew that he was the Christ.”

Jesus said he was God. Jesus’ claim to be God is without precedent or peer, as no founder of any major world religion has ever said he was God. Yet, Jesus clearly, repeatedly, and emphatically said He was God in a variety of ways. If this claim were untrue, He would have been guilty of violating the first commandment and as a blasphemer would have deserved death. This is why the people who disbelieved His claim kept seeking to put him to death. The eventual murder of Jesus for claiming to be God is recorded in Matthew 26:63–65, which says:

“But Jesus remained silent. And the high priest said to him, ‘I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.’ Then the high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.’”

By declaring that He came down from heaven, Jesus revealed that he was eternally God in heaven before his incarnation on the earth.^c By saying He was the only way to heaven, Jesus claimed to be both God and savior.^d Jesus refused to be considered merely a good moral instructor and instead claimed to be “God alone.”^e

Those who heard Jesus say these kinds of things wanted to kill Jesus because he was “making himself equal with God.”^f On this point, Billy Graham says, “Jesus was not just another great religious

^a Mark 1:24; Luke 4:33–34

^b Luke 4:40–41

^c John 6:38, 41–46

^d John 14:6

^e Mark 10:17–18

^f John 5:18

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

teacher, nor was he only another in a long line of individuals seeking after spiritual truth. He was, instead, truth itself. He was God incarnate."²²

Jesus' claims to be God were clearly heard and understood by his enemies, and Jesus never recanted.^a John 8:58–59 reports that Jesus said, "'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.' So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple." In John 10:30–33 Jesus also said:

"'I and the Father are one.' The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?' The Jews answered him, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.'"

On this point, New York's Judge Gaynor once said of Jesus' trial at the end of his earthly life, "It is plain from each of the gospel narratives, that the alleged crime for which Jesus was tried and convicted was blasphemy."²³ The Bible plainly says Jesus is God. Without question, the New Testament often refers to Jesus Christ as God, and a few examples will illustrate this truth clearly. Matthew refers to Jesus as "'Immanuel' (which means, God with us)."^b Thomas calls Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"^c Romans 9:5 speaks of "the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." Titus 2:13 refers to "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" and Titus 3:4 calls Jesus, "God our Savior." First John 5:20 says that Jesus Christ "is the true God." Lastly, 2 Peter 3:18 speaks of "our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Jesus is given the names of God. When picking a title for himself, Jesus was apparently most fond of "Son of Man."^d He spoke of Himself by this term roughly eighty times between all four Gospels.

^a Mark 14:61–64

^b Matt. 1:23

^c John 20:28

^d Matt. 24:30; 26:64; Mark 13:26; 14:62–64; Luke 21:27; 22:69

DOCTRINE

He applied the title from the prophet Daniel, who penned it some six hundred years before Jesus' birth.^a In Daniel's vision, the Son of Man comes to the Ancient of Days, the Lord himself. But He comes from the clouds, from heaven, not from the earth. This indicates that He isn't a human. He is given messianic dominion and authority, something no angel can obtain and is reserved for God. The Old Testament sees this divine person sitting alongside the Lord as an equal. This second person of the Trinity was promised to receive the messianic mission to redeem the world, to defeat every enemy and liberate people. As God, He is exalted over all peoples, nations, cultures, and religions to be worshiped as the eternal King. Jesus is the one who claimed He would be the Son of Man coming with the clouds as God.

Many other names for God are also attributed to Jesus Christ. Jesus claimed to be the "Son of God" on many occasions.^b In so doing, He was claiming to be equal to and of the same substance as God the Father. Those who heard Him use this title rightly understood that it was a divine title: "This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."^c

The New Testament refers to Jesus Christ as "Lord" several hundred times.^d That term is the equivalent of the Old Testament term "Jehovah," which is one of the highest titles the Bible ascribes to God. Thus, this title is ascribed to Jesus Christ as God and Lord.

In Revelation 22:13, Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end." With these titles, He is obviously referring to himself as eternal God. Bible commentator Grant Osborne says:

"The titles refer to the sovereignty of God and Christ over history. They control the beginning of creation and its end, and therefore they control every aspect of history in between. Since

^a Dan. 7:13. Also see Psalm 110

^b E.g., John 5:17-29

^c John 5:18

^d E.g., Rom. 10:9, 13; 1 Cor. 2:8; Heb. 1:10

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

this is the only passage to contain all three titles, it has the greatest emphasis of them all on the all-embracing power of Christ over human history."²⁴

Jesus' miracles confirm his claim to be God. The nearly forty miracles that Jesus performed throughout the New Testament demonstrate God is with Jesus. Just as miracles confirmed the authority and anointing of the ancient prophets and Jesus' apostles, the miracles of Messiah are God's way of giving His stamp of approval to the claims of Jesus.^a They point to Him as the person through whom God is doing his work. For example, when Jesus gave sight to the blind man, the people would have been reminded of Psalm 146:8: "The LORD opens the eyes of the blind." The fact of Jesus' miracles is so well established that even his enemies conceded it.^b

The Jewish Talmud charged that Jesus "practiced magic."²⁵ Celsus, a strong opponent of Christianity, later repeated that claim.²⁶ The noted Jewish historian Josephus also reported that Jesus was "a doer of wonderful works."²⁷ In John 10:36-39 Jesus speaks of these works:

"Do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God'? If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

Jesus' claim to deity includes declaring Himself to be without any sin in thought, word, deed, or motive and therefore morally perfect. In John 8:46, Jesus openly invites His enemies to recall any sin He ever committed saying, "Which one of you convicts me of sin?" Those who testify to the sinlessness of Jesus are those who knew Him

^a John 10:36-38

^b John 3:2; 5:36; 10:25, 32, 37-38; Acts 2:22; 10:38

DOCTRINE

most intimately, such as His friends Peter^a and John^b, His half-brother James^c, and even His former enemy Paul.^d Additionally, even Judas, who betrayed Jesus, admitted that Jesus was without sin^e, along with the ruler Pontius Pilate, who oversaw the murder of Jesus^f, the soldier who participated in the murder of Jesus^g, and the guilty sinner who was crucified at Jesus' side.^h

Furthermore, not only was Jesus God and without sin, He also forgave sin.ⁱ The Bible is clear that our sin is ultimately committed against God^k and that God alone can forgive sin.^m Thus, Luke 5:20–21 reveals Jesus doing the work of God:

And when he [Jesus] saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?"

Lastly, Jesus also claimed the power to raise the deadⁿ, judge our eternal destiny^o, and grant eternal life.^p

People worshiped Jesus as God. The Bible is emphatically clear that only God is to be worshiped.^q To worship anyone other than

^a Acts 3:14; 1 Pet. 1:19; 2:22; 3:18

^b John said that anyone who claims to be without sin is a liar (1 John 1:8) and that Jesus was without sin (1 John 3:5)

^c James 5:6

^d 2 Cor. 5:21

^e Matt. 27:3–4

^f Luke 23:22

^g Luke 23:47

^h Luke 23:41

ⁱ E.g., Luke 7:48

^k Ps. 51:4

^m Ps. 130:4; Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:34

ⁿ John 6:39–44

^o John 5:22–23

^p John 10:28

^q Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Matt. 4:10; Acts 10:25–26

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

God is both idolatry and blasphemy—two sins that the Bible abhors from beginning to end with the strongest condemnations. Jesus Himself repeats the command to worship God only when the Devil tempts Jesus to worship him. Therefore, the fact that Jesus accepted worship as God is one of the strongest arguments that Jesus Christ was and is fully God.

Jesus repeatedly invited people to pray to Him as God.^a As a result of His teaching, both men like Stephen^b and women like the Canaanite^c did pray to Jesus as God.

Jesus also said that He is to be worshiped along with the Father: “All may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”^d Upon His triumphal entry into Jerusalem when children worshiped him, Jesus quoted Psalm 8:2 in reference to Himself as God to be worshiped:

“When the chief priests and the scribes saw the wonderful things that he did, and the children crying out in the temple, ‘Hosanna to the Son of David!’ they were indignant, and they said to him, ‘Do you hear what these are saying?’ And Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, “Out of the mouth of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise”?’”^e

Commenting on this event, Craig Blomberg says:

“Jesus’ response, again using the introductory rebuke ‘Have you never read?’ tacitly applauds their acclamation in light of Ps 8:2 (LXX [Septuagint] 8:3, which is quoted verbatim). There the children are praising Yahweh, so Jesus again accepts worship that is reserved for God alone.”²⁸

Also, after being healed by Jesus, a man worshiped Jesus, and

^a John 14:13–14; 15:7

^b Acts 7:59–60

^c Matt. 15:25

^d John 5:23

^e Matt. 21:15–16

DOCTRINE

Jesus accepted his worship.^a Lastly, Philippians 2:10–11 envisions a day in which everyone bends their knee in subjection to Jesus and lifts their voice in worship of Jesus as Lord.

Taken together, all of this evidence reveals that Jesus was and is God. Or, as Colossians 2:9 says perfectly, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.”

WAS JESUS FULLY HUMAN?

The Bible affirms the humanity of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways. Jesus had a human name—Jesus (meaning “Yahweh saves”) Christ (meaning “anointed one”)—and a human genealogy.^b He was born of a woman^c, had brothers and sisters^d, and was racially Jewish.^e Jesus grew physically, spiritually, mentally, and socially^f, learned^g, experienced fatigue^h, sleptⁱ, grew hungry^k and thirsty^m, worked as a craftsmanⁿ, had male and female friends he loved^o, gave encouraging compliments^p, loved children^q, celebrated holidays^r, went to parties^s, loved his mom^t, prayed^u,

^a John 9:38

^b Matt. 1:1–17; Luke 3:23–38

^c Matt. 1:18–25; Luke 2:7; Gal. 4:4

^d Matt. 13:55

^e John 4:9

^f Luke 2:42, 52; 3:23

^g Matt. 4:12; Mark 11:13–14; Luke 2:40, 52

^h Matt. 8:24; Mark 4:38; Luke 8:23–24; John 4:7

ⁱ Mark 4:36–41

^k Matt. 4:2; Mark 11:12; Luke 4:2

^m John 4:7; 19:18

ⁿ Mark 6:3

^o John 11:3–5

^p Mark 12:41–44

^q Matt. 19:13–15

^r Luke 2:41

^s Matt. 11:19

^t John 19:26–27

^u Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; 14:32–42; John 17

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

worshipped^a, and obeyed God the Father.^b

Furthermore, not only did Jesus have a physical body^c, but He also suffered and died “in the flesh.”^d In addition to His body, Jesus also had a human spirit.^e Jesus was emotional as well, for the Bible notes that Jesus experienced grief^f, had compassion^g, was stressed^h, was astonishedⁱ, was happy^k and told jokes^m, and even wept.ⁿ

Taken together, these are clearly the ways we speak of human beings and reveal that Jesus was, as Jesus and other Scriptures state, a man.^o The importance of this fact is found in 1 John 4:2–3:

“By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.”

The belief in the full humanity of Jesus Christ was the dominant position of the early Christian church. The Church Father Athanasius expressed the church’s opinion well:

“Peter writes in his letter, ‘Christ therefore suffered in the flesh for our sakes’ [1 Pet. 4:1]. So when it is said that he hungered and thirsted and toiled and was ignorant and slept and cried

^a Luke 4:16

^b John 5:30; 6:38; 8:28–29, 54; 10:17–18

^c Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:7–8; Heb. 2:14; 1 John 4:2–3

^d Rom. 8:3; Eph. 2:15–16; Col. 1:21–22; Heb. 2:14; 10:19–20; 1 Pet. 2:24

^e John 12:27; 13:21; 19:30

^f Matt. 23:37; Luke 19:41

^g Matt. 9:36; Mark 1:41; Luke 7:13

^h John 13:21

ⁱ Mark 6:6; Luke 7:9

^k Luke 10:21–24; John 15:11; 17:13; Heb. 12:2, 22

^m Matt. 7:6; 23:24; Mark 4:21

ⁿ John 11:34–35

^o John 8:40; Acts 17:31; 1 Tim. 2:5

DOCTRINE

out and made requests and fled and was born and turned away from the cup—in general, did all the things which belonged to the flesh—let...all things of this sort be asserted as ‘for our sakes in the flesh,’ for this is precisely the reason the apostle himself said, ‘Christ therefore suffered’ not in the Godhead but ‘for our sakes in the flesh,’ in order that the passions might be recognized to be natural properties not of the Logos but of the flesh.”²⁹

HOW COULD GOD BECOME A MAN?

In AD 451, the Council of Chalcedon met to wrestle with the confusion that surrounded the divinity and humanity of Jesus. They issued the Chalcedonian Creed, which cleared up many heresies that wrongly defined the humanity and divinity of Jesus. In sum, the creed declared that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures (human and divine) who is both fully God and fully man.

Theologically, the term for the union of both natures in Jesus Christ is hypostatic union, which is taken from the Greek word hypostasis for “person.” Summarizing the hypostatic union, three facts are noted: (1) Christ has two distinct natures: humanity and deity; (2) there is no mixture or intermingling of the two natures; (3) although He has two natures, Christ is one person. The Chalcedonian summary of the incarnation is the position held by all of Christendom, including Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians.

In keeping with the biblical position of Chalcedon, we must retain both the full divinity and full humanity of Jesus Christ. To accomplish this, we must conclude that when Jesus became a man, He did not change his identity as God but rather changed his role. According to the church father Augustine, “Christ added to himself which he was not, he did not lose what he was.”³⁰

Jesus, who was fully equal with God in every way, who was the very form of God, did not see that as something to keep in His grip, but emptied himself of that equal status and role to take the status and role of humanity.

He, who was and is God, took the likeness of humanity. God

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

became the “image of God” for the sake of our salvation.^a

Theologians capture this humble emptying Himself of the divine equality, the divine lifestyle, with the phrase *he laid aside the exercise of his incommunicable divine attributes*. Some theologians would say that Jesus retained all of His divine attributes while on the earth but did not avail Himself to them to instead limit Himself to what humans can do. Other theologians would say that Jesus did not retain all of His divine attributes while on the earth but rather humbly set them aside during his incarnation. Either way, what this means is that Jesus did not continually use the attributes unique to deity such as His omniscience, or omnipresence, or immortality while on the earth. So Jesus in his humble state does not know the date of the second coming^b, is not present when Lazarus dies^c, and dies^d He did supernatural works like knowing that Lazarus was dead^e, raising the dead^f, healing diseases and casting out demons^g by the power of the Holy Spirit^h.

An analogy of this emptying would be a general manager of a resort who brings his family for a vacation week. He puts his general manager access key with all its power, rights and privilege in his pocket and uses a guest access key. For the duration of the week, he is fully the general manager, but lives authentically as a guest.

The key Scripture describing that God came as the man Jesus Christ because of humility and a willingness to be our suffering servant is Philippians 2:5–11, which says:

“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

^a Gen. 1:27; 2 Cor. 4:4

^b Matt. 24:36

^c John 11:6, 21, 32

^d Matt. 27:50; Phil. 2:8

^e John 12:1-14

^f John 11:39-41; Mark 5:35-43

^g Matt. 4:23-24; 8:16-33

^h Matt. 12:28

DOCTRINE

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. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

This amazing section of Scripture reveals to us that the second member of the Trinity came into human history as the man Jesus Christ. In doing so, Jesus exemplified perfect and unparalleled humility. In His incarnation, the Creator entered His creation to reveal God to us, identify with us, and live and die for us as our humble servant.

By saying that Jesus “emptied himself,” Paul means that Jesus set aside his rights as God and the rightful continual use of his incommunicable divine attributes. The eternal Son of God chose to become human and live by the power of the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that Jesus in any way ceased to be fully God, but rather that He chose not to avail himself of his divine rights and those attributes unique to deity while on the earth. Thus, He lived as we must live—by the enabling power of God the Holy Spirit. We want to be clear: Jesus remained fully man and fully God during His incarnation, and He maintained all of his divine personhood and attributes though He humbly emptied Himself of use of those unique to deity.

Jesus did not lose His divine attributes; He simply chose not to use them at certain times. In becoming a human being, Jesus did not lose anything but rather added humanity to His divinity.³¹ Therefore, Jesus Christ retained all of His divine attributes. He did not, however, avail Himself of the continual use of His divine attributes. Perhaps this was for two primary reasons.

One, on occasion Jesus would reveal His divinity as God. Matthew 9:35 says, “Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.” In Mark 4, some sailors on a boat with Jesus were exhausted from

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

rowing all night until Jesus awoke and commanded the storm to stop, which it did. Those present, “were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (v. 41). In John 2:11 Jesus turned water into wine, and we read, “This, the first of his signs, Jesus did at Cana in Galilee, and manifested his glory. And his disciples believed in him.” In summary, sometimes Jesus performed miracles to reveal the kingdom of God and himself as King.

Two, Jesus would use His divine characteristics to benefit others but not Himself. For example, we read in Mark 2:5-7 “Jesus...said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’ Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, ‘Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?’” Ultimately, we sin against God; therefore, only God has the authority to truly, completely, and eternally forgive our sin. When Jesus forgave sin, the religious critics who heard Him were correct; He was doing divine work reserved for God alone to benefit a needy sinner.

In summary, while on the earth, Jesus did retain His divine attributes, but He did not continually avail Himself to the use of His divine attributes. Furthermore, Jesus did not use His divine characteristics (e.g., all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present) in a way to benefit Himself. When suffering, Jesus suffered as we do; when learning, Jesus learned as we do; and when tempted, Jesus faced temptation as we do. In no way did Jesus cheat to make His life easier by using divine attributes that we do not possess.

In this regard, Jesus was not like Clark Kent. Superman had special powers that other people did not have, but he lived in disguise as Clark Kent, pretending to be like the rest of us when, in fact, He was not. Jesus is not like that. Jesus was not pretending to be a humble, homeless, hated peasant who was faking His suffering, learning, and tempting. When the Bible said Jesus was hungry, tired, wept, bled, and died, it was in His full humanity without an ounce of fakery. Hebrews 2:17-18 talks about this when it says,

“He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For

DOCTRINE

because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Nonetheless, Jesus’ life was lived as fully human in that He lived it by the power of the Holy Spirit.³²

WHAT ARE SOME PROMINENT FALSE TEACHINGS ABOUT THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION?

Regarding the full divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ, theologian J. I. Packer has said:

The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the “second man” (1 Cor. 15:47), determining human destiny, the second representative head of the race, and that He took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as He was human. Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of Godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus.³³

There are two general ways in which various thinking has erred regarding the humanity and divinity of Jesus. The first is to deny the full divinity of Jesus in favor of His humanity; the second is to deny the full humanity of Jesus in favor of His divinity.

The denial of the full divinity of Jesus has been done by heretics such as the Ebionites, dynamic monarchianists, Socinians, Servetusites, Nestorians, modalists, monarchianists, Sabellianists, Unitarians, Social Gospel proponents, “death of God” theologians, liberal “Christians,” Arians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, functionalists, Adoptionists, Kenotics, Apollinarians, and more recently by the popular book and film “The Da Vinci Code”.

The denial of the full humanity of Jesus has been done by heretics such as Marcionites, Docetists, Gnostics, modal monarchianists, Apollinarian Paulicians, monophysitists, New Agers, and Eutychians. Perhaps the people who most commonly prefer Jesus’ divinity over his humanity in our present age are Protestant

Christian fundamentalists. They are so committed to preserving the divinity of Jesus that they tend to portray His humanity as essentially overwhelmed by his divinity so that He was largely not tempted to sin, if indeed tempted at all.

In addition, the Bultmannian school (after Rudolf Bultmann) has separated the "Christ of faith" from the "Jesus of history." Subsequently, Jesus is more like an ancient Greek god. Some evangelical Christians make a similar error by removing Jesus' life and teachings from history in the world and relegating Him to the subjective realm of religious experience so that Jesus becomes little more than a figurative object for devotion and experience only in our heart.

Lastly, it is falsely believed that the Christian concept of incarnation is commonly held across many ideologies, if not even borrowed from them. Humanist mystic Aldous Huxley famously asserted that "the doctrine that God can be incarnated in human form is found in most of the principal historic expositions of the Perennial Philosophy."³⁴ In response, Geoffrey Parrinder has shown that Huxley's claim is grossly overstated.³⁵ Nonetheless, it is true that there is a long history of religious beliefs claiming that a god or goddess came to the earth in physical form. These are considered in the broadest sense to be incarnational teachings, although none of them is the same as Christian incarnation.³⁶

In many idolatrous religions, a deity is said to be present in or physically manifested as an object, which then comes to eventually be worshiped as the deity itself. Some idolatrous religions (e.g., Sikhism, Bahá'í, Hinduism) refer to incarnations as avatars, which literally means "descent." Christian apologist Timothy C. Tennent notes three ways in which such avatars are different from what Christians believe about the incarnation of Jesus Christ.³⁷ (1) Avatars are repeated endlessly throughout each cycle of history, whereas the incarnation is a unique, singular act in history. Jesus will not return for another incarnated life cycle or be replaced by another person housing His spirit. (2) An avatar comes forth because of accumulated karma and is therefore not a free act of God, like the determination of the Father to send Jesus into history before time began. (3) An avatar is a mixture and blending of the divine and human, whereas Jesus is not a blending of a god and a man but

rather God becoming man.

Therefore, because Jesus is the only God and his incarnation alone is altogether unique, it is a grievous error in any way to portray his earthly life as similar to avatars and the like that are postulated by other religions.

In another book I (Mark) wrote called *Christians Might be Crazy* we discovered numerous false views of Jesus through more than 900,000 phone calls and focus groups in three U.S. cities.³⁸ Many participants were curious about or highly committed to alternative theories about Jesus. One woman said that Jesus studied under Indian mystics for some 30 years. Another called Him a lightworker. Many guys thought He was a magician like David Copperfield or Criss Angel. One guy asserted that Jesus was not a zombie but a lich. A few people even called Jesus an alien, à la the History Channel series called "Ancient Aliens." Like Tony said, "That's my favorite series. What I love about that show is that they base it off of actual facts. They have proof that blows my mind when it comes to religion."

Is it possible Jesus was a mystic, lightworker, magician, lich, or alien? Perhaps—but is it probable? Is the evidence for those profiles more complete than the ancient eyewitness testimony of Scripture? Would low-budget specials on the History Channel or Discovery Channel hold up to the same scrutiny as the New Testament has faced for 2,000 years?

It is simply false that at some point long after Jesus that Christians selected from among competing ideas to create a storyline that would consolidate their own power. Church leaders did convene in councils including Laodicea (AD 363), Hippo (AD 393), and Carthage (AD 397). But they simply recognized writings already known and trusted by Christians everywhere as inspired Scripture for hundreds of years, in the case of the New Testament, and thousands of years, in the case of the Old Testament. The fact that these councils convened nearly four centuries after Jesus attests to the wide consensus that existed until heretics arose in that era.

HOW IS JESUS' INCARNATION A SOURCE OF GREAT COMFORT?

There are two categories of reason why Jesus' incarnation is a source of great comfort. The first is that, in the incarnation, Jesus is like us. The second is that, in the incarnation, Jesus is unlike us.

How Jesus Is Like Us

As the man Jesus Christ, the second member of the Trinity has lovingly and humbly identified with the frailty of our humanity by enduring temptation, distress, weakness, pain, and sorrow. He did so by coming as our priest.

In the Old Testament, the priest would humbly stand between God and people as a mediator of sorts. He would bring the hopes, dreams, fears, and sins of the people before God as their advocate and intercessor. He would hear their confession of sin and pray for them.

Furthermore, offering sacrifices was central to His role, to show that sin was very real and deserved death, while asking God for gracious forgiveness. Then He would speak God's blessing on the people. All the functions of the priest are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.

The book of the Bible that deals most thoroughly with the priestly role of Jesus is Hebrews. In Hebrews, we are told that Jesus is our "high priest."^a As our priest, Jesus has offered a sacrifice to pay the penalty for our sin. Not only is Jesus a priest superior to the Old Testament priests, but His sacrifice is also superior to theirs—He gave his own life and shed His own blood for our sin.^b

Hebrews reveals that Jesus' ministry as our priest did not end with His return to heaven. Rather, Jesus is alive today and ministers to us as our high priest who intercedes for us before God the Father.^c Practically, this means that Jesus actually knows us, loves us, pays attention to our lives, and cares for us. At this very moment, Jesus is bringing Christians' hurts, suffering, needs, and sins to the

^a Heb. 3:1; 4:14

^b Heb. 9:26

^c Heb. 7:25

DOCTRINE

Father in a prayerful and loving way as our priest.

Jesus' priestly intercession makes both our prayer and worship possible. We pray and worship the Father through Jesus our priest by the indwelling power of God the Holy Spirit, who has made our bodies the new temples in which He lives on the earth.

When we understand Jesus as our priest, we are able to know that He loves us affectionately, tenderly, and personally. Furthermore, Jesus' desire for us is nothing but good, and His ministry results in nothing less than life-changing intimacy with God the Father. Jesus makes new life and obedience possible by His loving, compassionate, and patient service to us as a faithful priest.

In his role as priest, Jesus is different from all other man-made religions and their false portraits of God. Virtually every religion sees God in a harsh way. Jesus is the only God who gets off His throne to humbly serve us and give us grace and mercy.

Perhaps the most insightful text of Scripture on the importance of the priestly ministry of Jesus is Hebrews 4:15–16, which says:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Thus, Jesus is sympathetic to our temptations, weakness, suffering, sickness, disappointment, pain, confusion, loneliness, betrayal, brokenness, mourning, and sadness. Jesus does not refrain from entering our sick, fallen, and crooked world. Instead, He humbly came into this world to feel what we feel and face what we face while remaining sinless. Subsequently, Jesus can both sympathize with and deliver us. Practically, this means that in our time of need, we can run to Jesus our sympathetic priest who lives to serve us and give us grace and mercy for anything that life brings.

How Jesus Is Unlike Us

In addition to being fully God, a primary way in which Jesus is

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

unlike us is that he alone is without sin.^a While the Bible is clear that Jesus never sinned, the question of whether He had a sin nature as we do has been a point of historical division between various Christian traditions.

The Eastern church says yes. They focus on Romans 8:3 (that the Father sent his own Son “in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin”), Hebrews 2:17 (Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect), and Hebrews 4:15 (which says he was one “who in every respect has been tempted as we are”). They then argue that this could not be if Jesus did not have any of the sinful thoughts or desires like the ones we wrestle with all the time. It is then argued that, although Jesus had a sin nature, He overcame it and showed us the perfect obedience that we can follow to live holy lives. The Western church says no. They focus on Hebrews 7:26–27: We “have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins.” It is argued that if Jesus had a sin nature, He could not fit this description. Furthermore, if He had sinful character, then He would be a sinner.

We are inclined to agree with the Western church and see the “likeness of sinful flesh” in Romans as a point of similarity rather than a point of character whereby Jesus had a sin nature. Subsequently, as the “last Adam”^b. Jesus was like the first Adam prior to the fall—without a sin nature—and therefore had a completely free will to choose obedience out of love for God the Father.

Because Jesus is like us in that He was tempted, yet unlike us in that he never did sin, He can help us when we are tempted and show us how to escape sinful situations.

Hebrews 2:17–18 says:

“Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

^a 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 2:22, 1 John 3:5

^b 1 Cor. 15:45

DOCTRINE

For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

In conclusion, Jesus alone can mediate between God and us because He alone is fully God and fully man and thereby able to perfectly represent both God and man. Regarding the vital importance of both Jesus’ humanity and divinity, theologian Jonathan Edwards says:

“First, I would consider Christ’s taking upon him our nature to put himself in a capacity to purchase redemption for us. This was absolutely necessary, for though Christ, as God, was infinitely sufficient for the work, yet to his being in an immediate capacity for it, it was needful that he should not only be God, but man. If Christ had remained only in the divine nature, he could not have purchased our salvation; not from any imperfection of the divine nature, but by reason of its absolute and infinite perfection; for Christ, merely as God, was not capable either of obedience or suffering.”³⁹

In other words, to redeem man, Christ first had to become a man. This is precisely what the Bible teaches: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”^a This verse reveals the threefold reasoning as to why Jesus’ incarnation is of such great comfort. (1) There is one God for all peoples, times, and places. (2) There is one mediator between sinful humanity and the one sinless God. This mediator remedies the sin problem that divides people and God so that there can be salvation and reconciliation. (3) Christ Jesus alone can mediate between God and man because he alone is the God-man.

HOW IS JESUS’ INCARNATION OUR EXAMPLE FOR MINISTRY AND MISSION?

In most religions, the holiest people are those who are most

^a 1 Tim. 2:5

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

separated from culture and sinners. They live as monks or nuns and the like in remote areas or behind walls away from average people. Conversely, Jesus Christ came into the mess of human history and spent time in relationship with believers and unbelievers alike. Subsequently, religious people who separated themselves from sinners and cultures were prone to denounce Jesus for the kind of company he kept.^a

Jesus' incarnation is our missional model. Roughly forty times in John's Gospel Jesus declares that the Father sent him. Indeed, the incarnation is the sending of the second member of the Trinity into human history as a missionary. This is what Jesus meant when he taught that Christians would be sent as missionaries like him into cultures by the power of the Holy Spirit: "'As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"^b

From the missional life of Jesus, we learn five great missional truths for our own life. First, an incarnational missional life is contextual and crosses cultural barriers. Just as Jesus left heaven to enter into culture on the earth, Jesus' people are to do the same and not merely remain in community with people of their own gender, race, income level, nationality, and the like.

Despite being contextual, a missional life does not condone or partake in the sinful worldly aspects of a culture, just as Jesus never sinned. Nonetheless, Jesus dressed, spoke, and ate according to Jewish culture, participated in their holidays, and observed their customs, so Jesus' people are also to live as missionaries in whatever culture God has sent them. Thus, in a very real sense, every Christian is a missionary whether they minister across the street or across the globe.

Second, an incarnational missional life is evangelistic. Just as Jesus did not merely come only to do good works for the needy but primarily to save lost people, Jesus' people are likewise to pursue lost people for evangelistic friendships.^c

^a Matt. 11:19

^b John 20:21-22

^c Luke 19:10

DOCTRINE

Third, an incarnational missional life is humble. Just as Jesus willingly left his state in glory to live a humble life and work a humble job, a missional life is one not lived solely for personal glory and upward mobility but rather values the gospel above all else. Subsequently, an incarnational approach to life often means that we make less money and live simpler lives than we could because we value gospel ministry above what worldly standards measure as success.

Fourth, an incarnational missional life is one devoted to the church. Jesus came to found, build, and head the church—his metaphorical body to continue his evangelistic plan for the world; therefore, Jesus' people are to give themselves to the church. This includes service and generosity as Jesus demonstrated^a so that not only can local churches grow, but more churches can be planted, more people reached, and more nations impacted by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Fifth, an incarnational missional life is global. While Jesus mainly confined His ministry to Israel, He did minister to a Samaritan woman who then evangelized to her people, and the deaf man of Decapolis.^b Additionally, the announcement of Jesus' birth by both the angels and Simeon was to be good news for all nations.^c This is because Jesus came to take away the sins of the world^d and establish the church as a mission center for the nations^e from which he would send out believers to be the salt and light of the nations.^f Jesus also prophesied that most of his worshipers would be from nations other than Israel^g because His love is for the entire world.^h

Indeed, the world is our mission field, and Jesus is our model incarnational missionary who went before us and now goes with us as we continue in his work by His Spirit as His church for His glory

^a 2 Corinthians 8–9

^b Matt. 15:21–28; 8:5–13; Mark 5:1–20; 7:31–37; John 4:1–42

^c Luke 2:10, 32

^d John 1:29

^e Mark 11:17

^f Matt. 5:13–14

^g Matt. 21:43; Luke 13:28–29

^h John 1:9, 29; 3:16–17, 19; 4:42; 6:33; 12:47; 16:8; 17:21

to our joy.^a

WHAT IS THE SECRET TO JESUS' SUCCESS?

The life of Jesus Christ, without peer, has left the greatest footprint in world history. When someone's life towers above everyone else, we study them to learn the secret to their success.

In the Old Testament, things such as a divine ladder, a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, a tabernacle, and then a temple that housed God's presence closed the distance between the holy God and the unholy people. All of this prefigured the coming of Jesus Christ as the connecting point between God in heaven and people on earth. 1 Timothy 2:5 describes the fulfillment this way, "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." In Jesus Christ, God humbled Himself for the special task of reconciling people to Himself.

The holiest person is also the humblest person. The Creator entered the creation, the eternal God stepped into human history, the omnipresent God walked from place to place—all to reveal God and redeem people.

If Jesus did not use His divine attributes to live His life and leave His legacy, how did He do it? Can you access the same life-giving, destiny-altering, God-revealing power for your life?

If we look to the ancient church creeds (doctrines) that are very helpful for many things, there is one thing missing—how Jesus lived His life. Notice how each creed moves from the birth of Jesus to the death of Jesus and omits the entirety of His life. The Apostles' Creed (fourth century AD) says Jesus was "born of the Virgin Mary; suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..." The Nicene Creed (fourth century AD) says Jesus "was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate..."

What is missing? Jesus' earthly life. If we do not know how Jesus lived His life on earth, how are we supposed to know how to live our life on earth?

^a Matt. 28:18–20

DOCTRINE

Regarding the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Martyn Lloyd-Jones says:

“What, then, does all this mean? It means that there was no change in His deity, but that He took human nature to Himself, and chose to live in this world as a man. He humbled Himself in that way. He deliberately put limits upon Himself. Now we cannot go further. We do not know how He did it. We cannot understand it, in a sense. But we believe this: in order that He might live this life as a man, while He was here on earth, He did not exercise certain qualities of His Godhead. That was why...He needed to be given the gift of the Holy Spirit without measure”.⁴⁰

Abraham Kuyper writes of the importance of the relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit:

This ought to be carefully noticed, especially since the Church has never sufficiently confessed the influence of the Holy Spirit exerted upon the work of Christ. The general impression is that the work of the Holy Spirit begins when the work of the Mediator on earth is finished, as tho [sic] until that time the Holy Spirit celebrated His divine day of rest. Yet the Scripture teaches us again and again that Christ performed His mediatorial work controlled and impelled by the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

In the book *Spirit-Filled Jesus*, I (Mark) write in detail about the personal relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and how we can live by His power as Jesus did. The empowerment of Jesus by God the Holy Spirit is repeatedly stressed in the Gospel of Luke which precedes Acts in showing the Spirit-filled life of Christ and then Christians as the two-part history of our faith. Here are a few examples:

- 1) Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit and given the title “Christ,” which means anointed by the Holy Spirit.^o

^o Luke 1-2

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

- 2) Jesus' relative Elizabeth was "filled with the Holy Spirit" when greeting Jesus' pregnant mother Mary, and her husband Zechariah went on to prophesy in the Spirit that their son John was appointed by God to prepare the way for Jesus.^a
- 3) An angel revealed to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus because "the Holy Spirit will come upon you."^b
- 4) Once born, Jesus was dedicated to the Lord in the temple according to the demands of the law by Simeon; "the Holy Spirit was upon [Simeon]" and the Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until seeing Jesus Christ.^c
- 5) Simeon was "in the Spirit" when he prophesied about Jesus' ministry to Jews and Gentiles.^d
- 6) John prophesied in the Spirit that one day Jesus would baptize people with the Holy Spirit.^e
- 7) The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his own baptism.^f Matthew adds the interesting statement that the Spirit rested on Jesus, as if to suggest that the remainder of his life and ministry on the earth would be done under the anointing and power of the Holy Spirit.^g
- 8) Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit."^h
- 9) Jesus was "led by the Spirit."ⁱ
- 10) Jesus came "in the power of the Spirit."^k
- 11) After reading Isaiah 61:1-2, "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me," Jesus declared, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."^m

^a Luke 1:41-43, 67, 76

^b Luke 1:35-37

^c Luke 2:25-27

^d Luke 2:27-34

^e Matt. 3:11; Mar. 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:34

^f Matt. 3:16; John 1:32-33

^g Matt. 3:16

^h Luke 4:1-2

ⁱ Luke 4:1-2

^k Luke 4:14

^m Luke 4:14-21

DOCTRINE

12) Jesus “rejoiced in the Holy Spirit.”^a

Gerald Hawthorne, who has written one of the most compelling books on the subject of Jesus’ relationship with the Holy Spirit, says, “[Jesus] is the supreme example for them of what is possible in a human life because of his total dependence upon the Spirit of God.”⁴²

How did Jesus Christ live His life and leave His legacy? By the Spirit.

It is common for Christians to speak about having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. We absolutely encourage this.

Jesus, however, lived His life by a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit. Our Helper was also Jesus Helper.

As God’s person, the Holy Spirit is fully God and the third member of the Trinity.

As God’s presence, the Holy Spirit is God with us.

As God’s power, the Holy Spirit empowered the life of Jesus Christ and also empowers the life of believers to live by His power.

If Jesus were living your life, what would He be doing and how would He be doing it? By the Spirit. That’s the key that unlocks the rest of your life. We don’t want you to live your life for Christ. We want Christ to live His life through you!

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL JOURNALING AND/OR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. If there was one miracle or event you could have been present to witness in the life of Jesus Christ on earth, what would it be?
2. Do you consider Jesus to merely be a good man, or actually the only God-man?
3. If you were God, would you have left the glory and pleasure of heaven to come down to this earth and suffer like Jesus did?
4. Have you ever considered that, in a very real sense, Jesus was adopted by Joseph since they were not biologically

^a Luke 10:21

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

- related? How does this encourage Christians to be involved in such things as foster care and adoption?
5. If Jesus were walking around on the earth today and said he was God, what do you think the reaction would be?
 6. If someone asked you to give your best reason why you believe that Jesus is God, what would your answer be?
 7. What is your favorite miracle of Jesus that the Bible records? Why?
 8. If Jesus were not truly God and invited people to worship him and pray to him, could he actually have been a good man at all? Would that not make him a con man?
 9. Do you more easily connect with the humanity or divinity of Jesus Christ?
 10. Do you have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit? If not, spend some time in prayer today inviting the Holy Spirit to make you more like Jesus.
 11. How is Jesus the supreme example of what it means to truly be Spirit-filled?
 12. What is the one thing that Jesus said or did during his earthly ministry that you find most amazing?
 13. What people has God put in your life that you need to talk to about Jesus in hopes that they become Christians?

NOTES

INCARNATION: GOD COMES

1. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 45.
2. *Ibid.*, 53.
3. Dallas Theological Seminary (2004; 2005). *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 161 (vnp.161.641.75).
4. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed., *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 105–6. The Targums were originally oral paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible which were later written down. Since Jews would not pronounce the Name of God, they substituted phrases like “the Holy One” or “the Name” along with “The Word (Memra).” See *Targum Neofiti* and the *Targum of Jonathan*.
5. For an excellent discussion of how there is complexity in the unity of God for first century Jews, see Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity*, Eerdmans, 2008.
6. Ron Rhodes, *The Counterfeit Christ of the New Age Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 215.
7. John 1:18; George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 278.
8. D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), Mic. 5:1.
9. Roy B. Zuck, ed. *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 66.
10. Jacob Neusner, *The Incarnation of God: The Character of Divinity in Formative Judaism* (Binghamton, NY: Global Academic, 2001).
11. See *Ibid.*, 12, 17.
12. *Ibid.*, 12.
13. *Ibid.*, 166.
14. Suetonius, *Life of the Deified Augustus*, Chapter 94.
15. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996), 264.

16. *Ibid.*, 256–57.
17. James Orr, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Scribner's, 1907), 138.
18. *The Apology of Aristides*, trans. and ed. Rendel Harris (London: Cambridge University Press, 1893), 25.
19. William A. Jurgens, *Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 342.
20. J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1930), 269.
21. "Is God Always Superior to Jesus?" Should You Believe in the Trinity? Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, Watchtower Society online ed., http://www.watchtower.org/e/ti/index.htm?article=article_06.htm.
22. Billy Graham, "God's Hand on My Life," *Newsweek*, March 29, 1999, 65.
23. Quoted in Charles Edmund Deland, *The Mis-Trials of Jesus* (Boston, MA: Richard G. Badger, 1914), 118–19.
24. Grant R. Osborne, *Revelation, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002), 789.
25. *Sanh.* 43a
26. Origen, *Contra Cels.* 1.38.
27. Flavius Josephus, "Jewish Antiquities," in *The New Complete Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 18.63.
28. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 315–16.
29. Athanasius, "Orations Against the Arians," bk. 3, in Richard A. Norris, trans. and ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 92–93, emphasis in original.
30. Quoted in G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1954), 94.
31. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:17, Jesus is the King who has the divine attributes of eternality, immortality, invisibility, and is called "the only God." According to other Scriptures, Jesus other divine attributes possessed by him during His life on earth include omnipresence (Ps. 139:7–12; Matt. 28:20), creator (Isa. 37:16; 44:24; John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), savior (Joel 2:32; Rom. 10:9–13), and deity as the only God (Isa. 45:21b–23; Phil. 2:10–11).

32. For a more thorough study of this and other issues regarding the Holy Spirit, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* by Graham A. Cole (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007) is a helpful resource.
33. Packer, *Knowing God*, 46.
34. Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Great Mystics, East and West* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 49.
35. Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Divine in Human Form in the World's Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 13.
36. See Winfried Corduan, "Jesus: The Avatar I Never Knew," *Christian Apologetics Journal* 4, no. 2 (2005): 29–44.
37. See Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002), 59–60.
38. <https://realfaith.com/sermon-series/christians-might-be-crazy/>
39. Jonathan Edwards, *History of Redemption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1793), 312.
40. Lloyd-Jones, *God the Father, God the Son*, 286–87.
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MARK DRISCOLL

With Pastor Mark, it's all about Jesus! Mark and his wife Grace have been married and doing ministry together for over twenty-five years. They also planted The Trinity Church with their five kids in Scottsdale, Arizona as a family ministry (thetrinitychurch.com) and started Real Faith, a ministry alongside their daughter Ashley that contains a mountain of Bible teaching from Pastor Mark as well as content for women, men, pastors, leaders, Spanish-speakers, and more.

Mark has been named by Preaching Magazine one of the twenty-five most influential pastors of the past twenty-five years. He has a bachelor's degree in speech communication from the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University as well as a master's degree in exegetical theology from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. For free sermons, answers to questions, Bible teaching, and more, visit **RealFaith.com** or download the **Real Faith app**.

Together, Mark and Grace have authored "Win Your War" and "Real Marriage". Pastor Mark has authored numerous other books including "Spirit-Filled Jesus", "Who Do You Think You Are?", "Vintage Jesus", and "Doctrine".

