

Lesson 58: The Incarnation

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INTRODUCTION

God becoming man, that is what we are here to consider today. Sadly we are able to say those words and not wonder, not draw back at the seeming impossibility of it. This is a central truth of our faith, one we talk about and sing about regularly, but one we fail to appreciate. My hope is to restore some of the wonder of this of this glorious truth. As someone has said the heights of our worship can never exceed the depths of our theology. Your worship will only ever be as good as your theology. It is my job then to expand your theology to try and bring your understanding to the point where it equals the worship that God deserves. This is an impossible task so we will have to take ourselves to the ends of what we can conceive so at least to give all that we can of our worship. Someone has suggested that the most shocking words in the Bible are John 1:14, 'And the Word became flesh,' because to say as much of YHWH was blasphemy. Bavinck says, 'It is completely incomprehensible to us how God can reveal himself and to some extent make himself known in created beings: eternity in time, immensity in space, infinity in the finite, immutability in change, being in becoming, the all, as it were, in that which is nothing. This mystery cannot be comprehended it can only be gratefully acknowledged.'¹ Another writes, 'The incarnation is God's greatest wonder, one that no creature could ever have imagined. God Himself could not perform a more difficult or glorious work. It has justly been called the miracle of all miracles.' My job today is to make an attempt at explaining this. Last week in the 1689 we considered the deity of Christ, and there we were called to stop and worship. Today we add to the wonder and the worship we thought could not be added to. Chapter 8, paragraph 2: 'The Son of God, the second person in the Holy Trinity, being very and eternal God, the brightness of the Father's glory, of one substance and equal with him who made the world, who upholdeth and governeth all things he hath made, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man's nature....' The One who made all things became a made One. Here we need to stop, to listen, to think deeply and well, and most importantly to worship.

Many verses point to the Son becoming flesh, we have already quoted John 1:14, but there are also Romans 8:3, 'For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh.' 1 Tim. 3:16, 'Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh.' Heb. 2:14, 'Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil.' Today as we consider this point of God becoming man we will be looking at Phil. 2:6-8, 'who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,

¹ Mark Jones, Knowing Christ, p25.

even death on a cross.’ This text registers a number of mysteries layering them one on top of another. We will hold these up to the light and linger over those that relate to the incarnation.

Mystery 1

The first mystery to be noted is one that Thomas highlighted last week. Jesus is God, v6, ‘who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.’ Paul begins with two astounding facts about Jesus. Firstly, that He has the essence of God, and secondly, that He is equal in station and privileges to God. It should be highlighted that a better translation is something like ‘who being in the form of God,’ there is a present continuous sense not a past tense. The Son did not become God nor cease to be God when He became man. Any first century Jew would be scandalized to hear that Jesus was in the form of God. The word ‘form’ does not mean merely appearance, think more of ‘true form’. Paul is saying that Jesus was truly God. Paul brings a second point that Jesus as God held all the entitlements of God, He held full equality with God in His hands. This is mystery number one, that God is a Trinity, that the Son as the second person of the Godhead is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father because He is consubstantial, one substance, with the Father. He was with God and was God, He is the radiance of the Father’s glory, He is the Eternally begotten Son. There is one God that subsists in three persons. We could stop here and allow this mystery to confound our conception of reality, but Paul goes on.

Mystery 2

V7, ‘but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.’ Here we come to the central mystery of the incarnation. How can the immutable God become a mutable man and still be the immutable God? Some have come to this verse looking for answers. The word for ‘emptied himself’ comes from the Greek word ‘kenoo’ and has been associated with a brand of thinking we call kenoticism. We take this to be a metaphorical term which some translations have translated as ‘became nothing’ but there are some who have taken it to be a technical description of the Son delimiting His divine nature in some way in order to make the incarnation possible. There have been a number of failed attempts to change God to make Him fit into a human nature. Some have taught that God lost some of His attributes in order to become human. That the Son gave up His omnipresence; His omnipotence; and His omniscience to become man. Others have suggested that Jesus gave up His divine prerogatives, that He gave up all the functions of being God for a bit, that the equality He had with God He somehow let go of. More a loss of function than attribute. But if you know your doctrine of God you know that God cannot lose any of His attributes, He is the perfect and unchanging God who cannot deny Himself. Nor can God suddenly halt those functions and actions of His being like His knowledge, His omnipresence, and omnipotence. We must conclude that phrase ‘emptied Himself’ is not a technical description of God losing something but the act of humiliation in the Son becoming incarnate without any loss to His being as God.

This leaves us in a quandary, how do we explain this central mystery, and if we can’t fully explain it, how do we put the right guard rails in place so that we don’t affirm wrong things or wander into error? There is a historic debate between the Reformed and Lutheran around the presence of Christ in the supper which can

shed light on this. The Lutheran view of the Supper known as consubstantiation believed that the real body and blood of Christ were present with the bread and wine by virtue of Christ's human nature participating in the divine attribute of being omniscient. The Lutherans believed that in the union of the two natures, there was a communication of properties so that the human nature benefitted from the attribute of omnipresence. The Reformed rejected this based on John Calvin's insights that the human nature of Christ is at the right hand of the Father, and the believer has true union with the Resurrected Head of the Church by our union with Christ by the Spirit. Calvin pushed back at this teaching of Luther insisting that while the baby Jesus was growing and being nourished He was sustaining the universe by the word of His power, being sustained and being the sustainer of all things at the same time. That the divine functions of the Son were not given to the human nature, that the divine nature was not circumscribed by or channeled through the human nature but continued an unchanged existence 'beyond' it. The Lutherans pushed back describing this doctrine as the 'extra Calvinisticum.' The Heidelberg Catechism reflects this debate in question 48: 'Q.48. If his humanity is not present wherever his divinity is, then aren't the two natures of Christ separated from each other?

A. Certainly not. Since divinity is not limited and is present everywhere, it is evident that Christ's divinity is surely beyond the bounds of the humanity he has taken on, but at the same time his divinity is in and remains personally united to his humanity.'

This debate has helped sharpen our own ability to engage with the two natures of the Son and the Bible's way of talking about Him. This discussion further highlighted the importance of the nature versus person distinction in the hypostatic union. We can say that the divine person of the Son died upon the cross but we cannot say that the divine nature of the Son died upon the cross. Acts 20:28 is an example of God having the characteristics of human nature, 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.' We can properly say that God has blood if we are speaking of the person of Jesus Christ in which the two natures are united; but we cannot say that God the Son has blood in His divine nature. Both attributes of the divine and human nature belong to the person of the Son in whom the two natures are united. But we cannot attribute divine attributes of human nature in general apart from the Incarnate Son. The person of the Divine Son suffered by virtue of the union of the two natures in the person, but the divine nature of the Son does not and cannot suffer. We must speak in this manner to honour the reality of the two natures. In this way we affirm that the person of the Son did not know the day or hour and knows all things. This may sound like a contradiction but there is no contradiction here due to two natures being present. The Puritan Stephen Charnock put it this way: "'He had both the nature which had offended, and that nature which was offended: a nature to please God, and a nature to please us: a nature, whereby he experimentally knew the excellency of God, which was injured, and understood the glory due to him, and consequently the greatness of the offence, which was to be measured by the dignity of his person: and a nature whereby he might be sensible of the miseries contracted by, and endure the calamities due to the offender, that he might both have compassion on him, and make due satisfaction for him. He had two distinct natures capable of the affections and sentiments of the two persons he was to accord; he was a just judge of the rights of the one, and the demerit of the other.'"²

² <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/heaven-kissed-earth-the-incarn.php>

Some have used the saying that Jesus become less by addition, not by losing anything of His divine nature, but humbled Himself by adding a human nature. There is a sense in which this is correct but also a sense in which it is not. God cannot be added to, it is forgetful to talk about God adding to His divine nature. It has been suggested that talking of God assuming a human nature is more accurate.

So when we read the gospels we must discern that there are times when His human nature is in the foreground but His divine nature cannot be denied, like when Jesus is hungry, is dying, or ignorant. But then there are times when we see divine actions like when Jesus forgives sins, calms storms, reads minds, grants life, and abides with his people to the ends of the earth. How these things hold together in one person, how we describe the inner psyche of how this all interfaces in the person of Christ is beyond our ability to know or describe. All we can do is insist that He is fully God yet fully man and not part of either nature is denied.

Mystery 3

The mystery deepens further still. We have seen the mystery of God as Trinity; we have spoken of the mystery of God assuming a human nature; we face the final mystery of the author of life dying and the Holy One becoming sin. V8, 'And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.' Paul puts forward three key aspects of Christ's work as a substitute by which we are saved. Firstly, we see the necessity of Jesus as a human being in order to save us, if Jesus was not human He could not save us. By being born a child of Adam He could represent the fallen children of Adam. He was human every way in which we are yet without sin. Secondly, the next part of how He saves us is found in those words 'becoming obedient'. His humanity saves us, because it is only a perfect human substitute that can represent us before God, to be a high priest and sacrifice for us. His life of obedience under the law fulfils the law that Adam broke and we cannot fulfil, by this obedience we become righteous in God's sight. When we believe in Christ, when we trust to His work on our behalf God credits us with Christ's perfect human life of law keeping. He puts it on our account and pronounces us righteous as if we were Him. Christ's obedience has two parts, He obeyed the law that we could not keep; and He obeyed the will of the Father in offering Himself in payment for our sins. We call these the active obedience and the passive obedience of Christ. The third element of Christ's work as our substitute is spelled out in His death on the cross. Paul talks about Christ humbling Himself by dying on the cross, but the word 'humbled' seems too soft. For God to become man, that is humility, but to die as a criminal upon the cross, that is humiliation.

As we consider the incarnation, yes we must take note of the biblical details and we must speak accurately about it, but let us remember the importance of this doctrine. Paul was not in the habit of merely spouting big theology to dazzle and bamboozle us but for real and practical purposes. God becoming man is the central miracle of Christianity because it is our greatest need as sinners alienated from God. God becoming man was a necessity because we cannot save ourselves, we need the One who we have sinned against and has every right to judge us to rescue us, and the incarnation is the powerful and unequalled way God saves sinners. Secondly, Paul uses the incarnation in the letter to the

Philippians to urge them to have this mind of Christ themselves. To be humble servants who are willing to put others need before their own as a way of life because this is what God has done for us. This is the greatest motivation, the greatest example, it is a universe changing event that must overflow into how we live. And our third application we can make is one of wonder and worship. Here we have more than the human mind can take in never mind comprehend; there is more wonder here than the human heart can express; we are thinking about things that angels long to look into. We must regularly think about these truths. Let this feed into how we remember the Lord's death every Sunday at the Lord's Supper. Let it inform your singing. Let it compel you in your private devotions.