

Is the Incarnation True, that God Became a Man?

by Servetus the Evangelical

The post-apostolic, institutional church has always proclaimed that God came down from heaven to earth and became a man. More specifically, it has claimed that the preexistent Logos-Son (Word-Son) took flesh to become the man, Jesus of Nazareth.

The church has labeled its doctrine that God became a man as “the incarnation.” It has asserted that the incarnation is one of the most essential doctrines, if not the most essential, of the Christian faith. The church has always declared that a person is *not* a genuine Christian unless she or he believes in this classical doctrine of the incarnation.

This theological term “incarnation” derives from the Latin word *incarnatus*, which means “in flesh,” or better, “enfleshment.” Latin church fathers applied *incarnatus* to “the Word” in John 1.14. It reads, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Surprisingly, John 1.14a is the only NT statement which confirms this concept.

Many traditionalist Bible expositors reason that God became the man Jesus Christ by comparing John 1.14a with the traditional translation of John 1.1c—“and the Word was God.” Their reasoning goes like this: (1) the Word was God; (2) the Word became flesh, i.e., the man Jesus Christ; therefore, (3) Jesus Christ was God. But this reasoning depends on the traditional translation of John 1.1c, which is quite suspect.

Thus, scholars regard the Gospel of John as being largely responsible for this church doctrine of the incarnation. This is due to the Logos teaching in its prologue, which consists of 18 verses, and several gospel texts concerning Jesus’ apparent preexistence.

Characters in the Gospel of John often misunderstood Jesus’ sayings because they took them literally whereas Jesus intended them metaphorically. That is why the Gospel of John has been called “the spiritual gospel.” (The most well-known instance of this misunderstanding is Jesus telling Nicodemus he needed to be born again [John 3.1-12]).

For example, the Johannine Jesus asserted, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven” (John 6.51). Christians have believed Jesus meant he preexisted and literally came down from heaven, thus confirming the incarnation. But he likely meant his coming down from heaven metaphorically, thus spiritually, since that is how he meant his words “bread,” “thirst,” “eat(s),” and “die” in this pericope. We read, “The Jews therefore began to argue with one another, saying, ‘How can this man give us His flesh to eat?’ Jesus therefore said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves’” (John 6.52-53). He meant this spiritually, saying, “the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (v. 63).

If Jesus was God, so that he necessarily preexisted and came down from heaven, he was not like the rest of us human beings, since none of us have preexisted and come from heaven. Yet the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus “had to made like His brethren in all things” in order “to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2.17). That is, Jesus had to be like us to provide salvation, making possible the forgiveness of our sins.

Church father Athanasius argued most strenuously for classical incarnation, and many subsequent church fathers and scholars adopted his reasoning. It was that Jesus had to be God, and therefore not a creation, in order to provide salvation. But this assertion is totally arbitrary, which is demonstrated by his failure to provide any scriptural support.

The author of Hebrews surely means that God made Jesus like other humans “in all things,” except that he didn’t cause them to sin and Jesus never sinned. For this author says Jesus was “tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (4.15). And he describes Jesus as “a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners” (7.26).

The author of Hebrews is not alone in these assertions. The Apostle Peter called Jesus “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3.14). And Peter quotes Isaiah 53.9 and applies it to Jesus, claiming that he “COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH” (1 Peter 2.22). Plus, the Apostle Paul writes about Jesus, saying that God “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (2 Corinthians 5.21). Finally, the author of 1 John says of Jesus that “in Him there is no sin” (1 John 3.5).

So, the NT reveals that Jesus had to be sinless, like a sacrificial lamb without defect, in order to become an acceptable sacrifice on the cross for our sins. While Jesus’ virgin birth aided him in becoming sinless, these things do not indicate that he was God.

The classical doctrine of incarnation has been seriously challenged in modern times. James Dunn informs, “since the Enlightenment the traditional doctrine of the incarnation has come under increasing pressure to explain and justify itself.” And Anthony Harvey surmised, “In the last few years it has come to be questioned whether the resultant construction of Jesus as ‘God Incarnate’ is either credible or intelligible ... the earliest Christians were constrained to stop considerably short of this” incarnational Christology.

Distinguished Roman Catholic theologian Hans Kung denies that the Gospel of John identifies Jesus as God. He asks, “Does the Son of God ‘become man?’ Certainly the category ‘becoming man’ is alien to Jewish and originally Jewish-Christian thought and derives from the Hellenistic world.... The Greek conceptual model of ‘incarnation’ must to some degree be buried.... The man Jesus did not act as God’s double (‘second God’). Rather, he proclaimed, manifested and revealed the word and will of the one God.” And Kung quotes John 17.3 for support, in which Jesus calls the Father “the only true God.”

In sum, neither the Gospel of John nor any of the Bible supports classical incarnation. Consequently, in the latter half of the 20th century, Bible scholars steadily abandoned it. Many now call Jesus “the Incarnate Word” and not “the Incarnate God.” Indeed, it is best to simply understand John 1.14a to mean that *Jesus is the man the Logos became*.