

THE INCARNATIONAL GOD

Martin Bleby

What does ‘incarnation’ mean?

‘Incarnation’ means ‘embodied in human flesh’ (from the Latin *carnis* meaning ‘of flesh’).

The Christian doctrine of the incarnation affirms that the eternal Son of God took human flesh from his human mother and that the historical Christ is at once fully God and fully human. This was defined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. as follows:

Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

Note that this definition was composed over four hundred years after Jesus had lived and died and risen. Necessary and helpful as such a definition may be, it is not the best place to start in consideration of who Jesus is. We need to go back to the Scriptures and work from there.

Scriptures relating to the ‘incarnation’

The word itself comes from John 1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him. And without him not one thing came into being that has come into being. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it . . . And the Word *became flesh* and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known (John 1:1–5, 14, 18).

Here one who is ‘God with God’ is identified as the man Jesus. Jesus indeed spoke to the Father of ‘the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed’ (John 17:5) and prayed for us to ‘be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world’. Jesus’ identification with God is not philosophical but relational—a matter of love in action:

My Father is still working, and I also am working . . . the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing . . . For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:17, 19–20, 26).

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (John 8:28–29).

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of the Father's hand. The Father and I are one (John 10:27–30).

Fullness of deity

Other Scriptures speak highly of Jesus in relationship to God:

He [the Father] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross (Col. 1:13–20).

For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority (Col. 2:9–10).

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Heb. 1:1–3).

There are intimations in the Old Testament that the anointed one whom God would send to save us would need to have the very nature of God Himself:

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, *Mighty God*,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6).

Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever.
Your royal sceptre is a sceptre of equity;
you love righteousness and hate wickedness.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you
with the oil of gladness beyond your companions (Psa. 45:6–7; quoted in Heb. 1:8–9).

The human flesh of Jesus

These considerations, however, may lead us to underestimate the reality of the 'flesh' that Jesus was—and is. Jesus was born as a baby, and grew up (Luke 2:7, 40, 52). He went through temptation and suffering:

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested . . . For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin . . . In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb. 2:17–18; 4:15; 5:7–8).

Jesus got tired (John 4:6), and sometimes wanted to get away from it all (Mark 6:31). He knew what it was like to feel drained (Luke 8:46). He was hungry and thirsty (Matt. 4:2; John 19:28), and he went to the toilet (Mark 7:19). He actually died, and was buried (John 19:30–42). He could be seen and touched and felt and loved (Luke 24:39–43; John 20:17, 27–28¹). To say nothing of his sense of humour (Mark 10:25), and his intimate and incisive knowledge of everyday human affairs (Matt. 13:3; 20:1; 22:2; etc.).

Knowing Jesus as God Incarnate

We cannot know Jesus as God incarnate by garnering texts and trying to prove a point. It is not something that was obvious to anyone at the time—not even to his closest disciples. Such knowing is not accessible to us of ourselves, for us to get a hold of it. It has to be given to us—by God himself:

He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven’ (Matt. 16:15–17)

That this came to Peter from the Father and not from himself is underscored by the fact that Peter, immediately afterwards, so badly misconstrued the necessity of Jesus’ suffering, death and resurrection, and vehemently opposed it, and by Jesus’ rebuke that this came from Satan and from Peter’s human flesh, opposing God.

Without this revelation from God, those who were ready to destroy Jesus were capable of concluding that Jesus, far from being ‘God from God’, operated ‘by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons’ (see Matt. 12:14, 24).

Paul tells us that we have received ‘the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God’, and so we can speak ‘God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory’. It is from the lack of this Spirit that ‘None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory’ (1 Cor. 2:12, 7, 8). So with us all: ‘even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view [*Greek*: according to the flesh], we know him no longer in that way’ (2 Cor. 5:16).

Jens Christensen comments:

St Paul mentions the mystery of Revelation at least three times (Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:26; Eph. 3:9) which was hidden before but now has come to light through Christ. The mystery of Revelation is just: That God Reveals Himself through Himself. Or, said in another way, God and His Revelation are one. There is no third something between God and Man. There is no book, no person, no law, no other agency used by God to reveal Himself. He is His own Revelation. This statement is NOT, definitely not, philosophical. Considered as philosophy it is quite absurd and entirely outside the range of man’s speculation. It is a theological statement, pure and simple. It is the outcome of a fervent study of the life and work of Christ. It has been held by the Church from the very start, as may be seen from the Church’s answer to the heresies of the first five centuries. We must go one step further. From the study of the life of our Lord one fact becomes astonishingly clear: Christ as the Revelation of God is not immediately available for mankind. It is only where and when it pleases God that He, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, opens the eyes of men so they can see God revealed in Christ. In other words, God in His revelation does not pass out of God’s control and into man’s. Man cannot with his own power accept or reject God in His

¹ Note that these references are to Jesus after he rose from the dead. This was no ‘spiritualised’ presence. It was in his ‘flesh and bones’ body that Jesus ascended into heaven. It has important implications for us to realise that Jesus remained fully human after his resurrection and ascension—‘He loved his body so much he took it with him!—and evermore remains so: ‘Glorified dust is at the right hand of God!’

revelation. God is God, in Himself, in His revelation, and in the comprehension of His revelation. Thus and only thus can God be God, and yet be revealed to mankind.²

This shows the essential importance of being in the gift of faith, by which we are in right relationship with God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, for us to know and participate in this mystery.

What Is a Human Being, Anyway?

Part of our problem is that we think we already know what a human being is, and we think we know what God is, so we think we can work to put the two together in something called the doctrine of the incarnation. It could be, however, that we do not really know what a human being is, and that the notions we have of God are quite wrong. It could be that only in Christ Jesus do we have the true and full revelation of both.

Jesus as ‘Son of Man’

While Jesus, as we have seen (Matt. 16:15–17), accepted being called ‘Son of God’, the title he most used for himself was ‘Son of Man’. ‘Son of’ is a Hebrew expression meaning ‘having the true character of’ or ‘being quintessentially’ something. Hence James and John were known as ‘Sons of Thunder’ (Mark 3:17), because of their thundery character (as in Luke 9:52–56), and Barnabas was called ‘son of encouragement’ (Acts 4:36), because he was a very encouraging person (as in Acts 9:26–28; 11:22–26). Can we not say then that ‘Son of Man’ means someone who is quintessentially human—the true human being? We tend to think that Jesus is human plus something more. It could be that he is the one true human being. We tend to excuse our sin by saying, ‘I’m only human’. What if sin was never meant to be part of our makeup as human beings? What if our ‘normal’ experience of being human is actually sub-human—something less, perhaps something sadly far short, of what it really means to be a true human being? If Jesus is the true human being (what Paul calls ‘the last [or second] Adam’—see 1 Cor. 15:45–49), then to be truly human is to be like Jesus. If that is so, then we could never again say, ‘I’m only human’—to be human is to be really something!

Humankind in the Image of God

This takes us right out of the area of human philosophy, and into the creational purpose of God for humanity:

Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind [Hebrew *adam*] in our image, according to our likeness . . .’ So God created humankind [*adam*] in his image, in the image of God he created them; [*Heb. him*] male and female he created them (Gen. 1:26, 27)

It has been said: Everything God is, we are *not* that, but everything God is, we are *like* that. Our problem is that, not content with this exalted position, we have sought to be *as* God ourselves (see Gen. 3:5; compare Isa. 14:13–14; Ezek. 28:2, 15, 17)—which of course, as creatures, we can never be.

We find further on that this ‘image’ is essentially relational, and filial: God is our Father, and we are to be His sons and daughters:

When God created humankind, [*Heb. adam*] he made them [*Heb. him*] in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them and named them ‘Humankind’ [*Heb. adam*] when they were created.

² Jens Christensen. *Mission to Islam and Beyond*, NCPI, Blackwood SA, 2001, p. 237.

When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son *in his likeness, according to his image*, and named him Seth (Gen. 5:1–3).

This further elucidates the statement that Jesus as the beloved Son is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col. 1:15); and God’s intention for those ‘who are called according to his purpose’: ‘For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be *conformed to the image of his Son*, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family’ (Rom. 8:28–29).

This is God’s purpose in creation, in which the incarnation of the eternal Son of God holds a central place.

Incarnation and Atonement

However, for us to be saved from our dreadful sin, and to be conformed to the image of God’s Son, could not happen simply by Jesus taking on our flesh and becoming one of us, as if his character and goodness could be spread to us by some benign influence or suffusion of being.

This is partly what lies behind what is sometimes called the ‘incarnational principle’, by which we are encouraged so to identify with others, especially in their suffering, and so involve ourselves in human affairs and issues, as it is said Jesus did with us, that his righteousness and justice may be spread throughout the world. We are indeed to love all people in practical and self-giving ways, but it will take more than that to redeem the world, since we are sinners who are part of the problem and need redeeming ourselves.

The Scriptures have something else as the essential purpose of the Son of God coming in human flesh:

You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin . . . Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:5, 8).

‘She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’ (Matt. 1:21–23).

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 to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3–4).

Such was the magnitude and magnificence of the mercy that came to the apostles and all who believed in Jesus, that they could only say that what happened in him was the very action of God Himself:

this man, handed over to you *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law (Acts 2:23).

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself [*or* God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself], not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us (2 Cor. 5:18–19).

Jesus himself said that the action of the cross would be the full exposure of the very heart and being of God:

When he [Judas] had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified; if God is glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself, and glorify him at once' (John 13:31 *RSV*).

P. T. Forsyth concludes:

The divinity of Christ is what the Church was driven upon to explain the effect on it of the cross.

The doctrine of the Incarnation grew upon the Church out of its experience of the Atonement.³

Only if we have come into that same experience will the incarnation be more than just a religious doctrine, or a pious fabrication, or even an inspiring example—it will have become for us a sure and necessary article of saving faith.

With this knowledge and experience, the apostles did not hesitate to include the man Jesus in the unity of God:

for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:6).

The Christological Heresies

So astounding and confronting is this reality of the person and work of Christ, that human flesh still in its guilt has sought in every way to deny and distort it. The full gamut of ways in which this can be done emerged in the first four centuries of the Christian era. It was these heresies that the Council of Chalcedon was seeking to confute, by reasserting the authentic Christian experience of salvation as witnessed to in the Scriptures. Though officially settled at that time, the same heresies continue to rear up in every age.

Docetism

Jesus was really God, and only 'appeared' to be man. Characterised as 'God in a skin'. The unthinking default mode of many pious Christians in churches today, including those who want a God of power to compensate for the deficiencies of their lives. In its original form included a denial that this Christ could ever have suffered and died on a cross.

Countered by Chalcedon: 'complete in manhood . . . truly man . . . of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin'.

Ebionism

Jesus was a man, and not God. He was a holy man who kept the law of God. Popular in the early days among some Jews who wanted to adhere to the man Jesus. Resuscitated by 'liberal' Christianity from the nineteenth century, associated with 'humanism'. The standard approach of the secular media today, and of most modern novels on the subject. Includes a denial that his death was in any way a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice that was necessary to save us from our sin—more of a loving example to us all.

Against this Chalcedon averred: 'complete in Godhead . . . truly God . . . of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead'.

Sabellius

Jesus was God incarnate, but God is only one and solitary, so he was this God, the Father, who became human, for a while, and then went back to being God. Another unthinking assumption among some today who have been taught that Jesus is God, and think of God as exalted and removed, in no direct personal relationship with us. Was also known as

³ P. T. Forsyth. *The Cruciality of the Cross*, NCPI, Blackwood SA, (1910) 1984, pp. 30, 99 footnote.

‘Modalism’—the single God manifested Himself in different modes: first as Father, then as Son, then later as Holy Spirit. Could also involve ‘Patripassianism’—it was the Father who suffered on the cross. Governed more by philosophical notions of the oneness of God than by attention to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

Against this Chalcedon asserted, not only that Jesus was human, but also that he was his own person, distinct from the Father: ‘one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ . . . one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten . . . one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ’.

Paul of Samosata

Jesus was a ‘mere man’, influenced by God. A version of Ebionism with which the ancient Greeks were comfortable, as are many modern Westerners—see above.

Answered by Chalcedon: ‘of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead’.

Arius

Jesus was a kind of demigod—something more than man, and less than God: somewhere in between. Depended partly on the logic of seeing Jesus’ relationship with the Father in human terms; hence ‘There was a time when he was not’. Appealed to the popular religious imagination, gained influence in the imperial court, and nearly took over the whole of the church. Athanasius, on the run, stood against it, and was influential at the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.), which began to formulate what we now call the ‘Nicene Creed’ (380 A.D.). This includes the words: ‘eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father’. Arianism reappears in the modern guise of wanting to see Jesus as some kind of super-hero.

Chalcedon affirmed: ‘at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man . . . of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood . . . as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer’.

Apollinarius

Came up with a compromise mixture which was neither God nor human: Jesus was the Divine mind and will with a human body and an animal soul. Indicates the confusion we come to when we try to work it out cleverly ourselves with our own tiny minds. Later coming out as ‘Monophysitism’ (which survives in some ethnic churches today)—that Jesus had ‘one (composite) nature’, partly Divine and partly human, and ‘Monothelitism’, in that it sees Jesus as having only ‘one will’—that of God. ‘My Father . . . not what I want, but what you want’ (Matt. 26:39) indicates that Jesus has a will of his own, which he has freely and perfectly aligned with the Father’s will.

Chalcedon sought to make this clear: ‘truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body . . . recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence’.

Nestorius

Saw Jesus as being the combination of two persons—a Divine person and a human person—in a kind of married co-operation: Man side-by-side with God. Nestorian Christians pioneered mission into Asia as far as China. Appeals to the modern notion of humanity co-operating with God in a kind of fifty-fifty partnership (which underestimates our need for and absolute dependence on God’s grace).

Chalcedon emphasised the oneness and integrity of Christ's personhood: 'recognized in two natures . . . without division, without separation . . . the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ'.

Eutyches

Said that Jesus had only one nature—the Divine—into which the human was totally absorbed. Paralleled by Buddhist-type notions popular today.

Chalcedon insisted on the complete human nature of Jesus: 'without change . . . the characteristics of each nature being preserved'.

Jesus is the Son of God Come in the Flesh

We can see how the Chalcedonian definition fights with rigorous intellect to deny error and affirm the truth of Christ as witnessed to in the Scriptures. Yet we can also see why that makes Chalcedon not a good starting-point. Doctrine that is formulated in response to heresy inevitably must be coloured by it. It attempts to meet heresy on its own ground, and so must to some extent end up playing the same game and using the same terms at that level. This makes it serviceable as a clarification and a checklist, but not as a basis for believing. Our believing comes from the word of God in the gospel, as testified to by the apostles in the Scriptures, and it is to this that the Chalcedonian Council looked. So must we, in whatever we face today, however we may need to formulate it for our own times.

John the apostle said:

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 . . . God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins . . . And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us (1 John 4:2–3, 9–10, 14–16).

That must be the touchstone, and the goal, of all our teaching.