

Christmas Gift Exchange

Doubt for Trust

At its heart, Christmas is about the doctrine of the Incarnation. The doctrine of the Incarnation states that the second person of the Trinity—the eternal Logos, God the Son—became human without losing any of His divinity. God the Son took into personal union with Himself, without confusing it, changing it, or separating it from His eternal divine nature, a complete human nature through which He experienced death. In short, the doctrine of the Incarnation says that Jesus is God in the flesh. Read John 1:1-14; Matthew 1:20-23; Philippians 2:6-7; and Titus 2:11-13. Does the Incarnation make rational sense? Sure. Let's ask Yahweh for wisdom concerning the doctrine of the Incarnation. Let's trade doubt for trust.

James 1:5-6—If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith, doubting nothing, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind.

Proverbs 3:4-6—Trust in Yahweh with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.

For the doctrine of the Incarnation to make sense, we make use of philosophical distinctions as background and important explanatory phrases that help us articulate this vital doctrine.

- 1. Individual Essence**—everything you are (the total composite of your being)
Kind Essence—which group you belong to (humankind, kitty kind, etc.)
 - 2. Common Properties**—characteristics that *most* in a given kind will have
Essential Properties—characteristics that one *must* have to be of a given kind
 - 3. Merely Human**—one only has the essential properties to be in the humankind
Fully Human—one has all the essential properties to be in the humankind
- A. “Christ is one person with two distinct and complete natures—human and divine.”
 - B. “The Logos is the rational soul of Jesus—which is possible since mankind is made in the image of God.”
 - C. “Divine aspects of Jesus Christ were largely subliminal during the Incarnation—which is necessary for Jesus to have a typical human experience.”
 - D. “Jesus ceded the privileges of being God without relinquishing the position of being God.”

Topic: Our given kind is humankind. What are some properties common to humankind? What are the essential properties of humankind? How can God become a human and not lose His divinity? (See Genesis 1:26-27) How can a person be fully human but not merely human? Do you trust the four explanatory phrases? All of them are important, but what are the theological implications if D was not true—if Jesus stopped being God during the Incarnation?

Association: Have you studied this doctrine before? Have you explained it before. Try to now.

Guidance: What are some ways that we can seek better to understand the doctrine of the Incarnation? What are your best tips for tackling a difficult topic like this? Pray with and for one another, asking Yahweh to give you wisdom and to help you trust in the Incarnation.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

The Incarnation is one of the Essential Christian Doctrines. As such, we must understand what this doctrine is, why this doctrine is important, how it is attacked, and how to defend it if we are going to truly appreciate the overall coherence of Christianity. The word incarnation means “infleshment.” The central claim of the Incarnation is the deity of Christ. One way to describe this doctrine is to say that the second person of the Trinity—the eternal Logos, God the Son—became human without losing any of His divinity. Another way to describe what is going on with the Incarnation is to affirm the content of the Chalcedonian Creed: the eternal second person of the Trinity, God the Son, took into personal union with himself, without confusing it, changing it, or separating it from his eternal divine nature, a complete human nature through which He experienced death.

Yahweh promised that a virgin would be with child and that through this child, we would experience “God with us”/Emmanuel. Yahweh sent the angel Gabriel to tell Mary that she would be that promised virgin. Gabriel told Joseph and Mary to name the child Jesus for He would save His people from their sins. The name Jesus means “Yahweh Saves.” This name points both to His nature—Yahweh in the flesh, and to His mission—to save His people from their sins.

So the Incarnation claims that Jesus is God in the flesh. This is a huge claim. The importance of this doctrine cannot be overstated. Jesus must be divine for His sacrifice on the cross to cover and save us from our sins. Jesus must also be a human being for His sacrifice on the cross to cover our sins. Jesus must be a human being to fully cover and die for another human being. A perfect, sinless human being can die for another human being. If the sacrifice is anything less than a human being, then the sacrifice cannot cover once-and-for-all any human’s sin. Other sacrifices would be required later (just like the OT sacrifices needed to be made over and over again). If he is merely a human being, then Jesus cannot cover once-and-for-all multiple human’s sins. There would only be a 1:1 correspondence. One sinless human being may sacrifice himself for another human being’s sin. If Jesus’s death covers the sins of everyone who would believe in Him, then He must be more than a human being—He must be divine. If Jesus is Yahweh in the flesh, then His death can cover an unlimited number of human beings and their sin. The Incarnation says that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

This monumental truth, essential for us to be saved, has been under attack for thousands of years. In fact, the primary reason that the Jewish religious elites wanted Jesus killed was for the charge of blasphemy—Jesus claimed to be God. The main way that the Incarnation comes under attack is by those arguing that Jesus cannot be God since such a thing is impossible.

The divinity of Jesus is attacked on grounds that the stuff that makes God God is different from the stuff that make a human a human. Consider the following argument from a well-known atheist:

1. God is creator
2. Christ is God
3. Christ is Man
4. Man is created
5. The creator is not created
6. Thus Christ is creator (1, 2)
7. Thus Christ is not created (5,6)
8. Thus Christ is created (3,4)
9. Thus Christ is created and not created (7,8)
10. Thus the Incarnation is Dumb

This argument seems pretty strong. It cannot be the case that Jesus Christ is both created and not created, can it? No, of course not. Not if we use “created” in the same sense. This argument does not distinguish between what is being considered when the word “created” is being used. The Incarnation claims that the second person of the Trinity, who is eternal and uncreated, became a human being by taking on a created, physical human body. Only the physical body of Christ was created. This is described in Luke 1. The Holy Spirit overshadows Mary and creates a special body for the eternal Son to inhabit. Just as Adam received a specially created body, so too the second Adam required a specially created body—one that is not impacted by humanity’s fall/sin. The above argument is disingenuous because it presents things as though certain distinctions do not exist. Only the body of Christ was created. The One who became Jesus in the Incarnation is uncreated and has existed from eternity past in perfect communion with the Heavenly Father and with the Holy Spirit.

Christians must be able, not only to understand what the Incarnation is and why it is important, but must also be able to defend it. So what is the best way to proceed? Many want respond to these types of arguments by noting that Jesus really is God in the flesh by citing some of our favorite passages of Scripture, like...

John 1:1-14—“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 apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. And the Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it... There was the true Light which, coming into the world, enlightens everyone. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to what was His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. 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.

Matthew 1:20-23—“But after he had considered this, an angel of Yahweh appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what Yahweh had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a Son, and they will call Him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

Philippians 2:6-7—“Jesus, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a slave, being made in human likeness.”

Titus 2:11-13—“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

While the content of this approach is true and biblical, pointing out that the Bible shows that Jesus is God in the flesh and providing multiple examples of this, does not really address the issue raised by the above arguments. Our opponents could still say, “The idea of God-man is self-contradictory and silly, which shows that not only is the doctrine false, but so is the Bible for supporting such an impossible notion.”

Instead, we must first demonstrate that the idea of Incarnation is not logically incoherent. We must show that the Incarnation *could* actually happen. Then, after we demonstrate that the notion of the Incarnation is possible, we should present the biblical evidence that shows Jesus is actually God in the flesh.

So how can a Christian demonstrate the logical possibility of the Incarnation? After explaining what the doctrine is by using the language above, we must explain that a number of critical philosophical distinctions are required to demonstrate the doctrine's coherence. These distinctions are not controversial or too complex. They simply must be understood and kept in mind when trying to show that God could become a human being. Here are the three key philosophical distinctions:

1. Individual Essence—everything you are (the total composite of your being)
Kind Essence—which group you belong to (humankind, kitty kind, frog kind, etc.)
2. Common Properties—characteristics that *most* in a given kind will have
Essential Properties—characteristics that one *must* have to be a member of a given kind
3. Merely Human—one *only* has the essential properties to be in the humankind
Fully Human—one has all the essential properties to be in the humankind

When considering Jesus, then, His individual essence includes His human nature and His divine nature. It includes His attitudes, physical characteristics, and His mental states. While everyone has only one individual essence, Jesus has two kind essences. He is a member of both humankind and divine kind in virtue of possessing all the essential properties of both groups. To be human, one must have a soul in the image of God and a hominid body. Jesus is the image of God. In fact, He is the exact representation of God's nature. Jesus is fully human (and fully divine) but He is not merely human. He has all the essential human properties and He has all the essential divine properties. To be divine, one must be All-Knowing, All-Powerful, All-Good, Eternal, Necessary, and a part of the Trinity. God the Son, who is the second person of the Trinity, has all of those properties, and thus is divine. The person Jesus Christ is God in the flesh.

The next step is to explain how this can be possible by referring to some very precise and specific explanatory phrases. Here they are:

A. "Christ is one person with two distinct and complete natures—human and divine." The reason that these two natures do not contradict is because human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Even if our opponent does not believe Scripture, we are simply showing that our doctrines form a coherent whole. If they are true, is the Incarnation possible? Yes. Since human beings are made in God's image, the properties that comprise humanity are not contradictory of the properties that comprise divinity. Both have freedom, creativity, rationality, etc. While it is true that God cannot be created, only the body of Jesus was created, which leads us to our next explanatory phrase.

B. "The Logos is the rational soul of Jesus—which is possible since mankind is made in the image of God." The second person of the Trinity—the Logos—is uncreated and eternal. Not only that, but because humanity was made in God's image, the Logos already possessed everything necessary for full and complete membership into humankind except for a body. Jesus was given a miraculously created body at the virgin conception. So Christ's soul was uncreated, but His body was created. These two truths are not contradictory at all. But how would Jesus have normal human life if he was also God? On to our next explanatory phrase.

C. “The divine aspects of Jesus Christ were largely subliminal during the Incarnation—which is necessary for Jesus to have a typical human experience.” Little baby Jesus did not know He was God in the flesh. 12 year old Jesus did not know He was God in the flesh, just that He was not the same as everyone else. Adult Jesus did know that He was God in the flesh, but in His waking consciousness, did not know everything God knows. Everyone knows more in their sub-consciousness than they can hold in their waking consciousness. Because of His human body, Jesus had a typical waking consciousness. But because He is also the divine Logos, Jesus had an infinite and unlimited sub-consciousness that knows everything. The reason this does not make Jesus so unlike other human beings is because He did not have access to the information in His sub-consciousness any more than any other human being has access to his sub-consciousness, which is explained by our last phrase.

D. “Jesus ceded the privileges of being God without relinquishing the position of being God.” Jesus had to maintain the position of being God for His sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection to save us (which rules out kenotic Christology—the idea that the second person of the Trinity stopped being God when He became Jesus). Jesus had to live among us like the rest of us, to be dependent on the Father and the Spirit, needing to sleep and eat, able to die, etc. in order to be the perfect and effective sacrifice. If Jesus had access to all His God-powers all the time, then His experience would be far different from other human experiences. Think about it like this: could you beat up Chuck Norris in a fight? No. It would be unfair. But things would be much fairer if Chuck’s hands were handcuffed behind his back. He would still be Chuck Norris; he just would not be able to punch you (he would just kick you). Jesus took on a human body, which limited His ability to utilize His God-powers, but He was still God in the flesh.

That may be a lot of information, and it may be confusing, but it all adds up to a coherent picture of the Incarnation, which means that the doctrine is possible and the attacks on it are defeated. Since the Bible shows that Jesus is actually God in the flesh and because the Holy Spirit testifies to that truth, we can both show that the Incarnation is possible and we can know that the Incarnation is true!

Christmas Gift Exchange Fear for Joy

We've all likely been invited to participate in a Christmas gift exchange at an office party, at a gathering of friends, or some other occasion. Maybe it was billed as a "white elephant" gift exchange or as a "Yankee swap" gift exchange, but the idea is that we bring some low-dollar gift or a gag-gift of some sort. We do not bring any grand gift to such an exchange, yet we hope to receive something unexpectedly neat. So, too, in the spiritual realm, when it comes to exchanging things with God, we have no grand gift to bring. We are sinful, fallen creatures with only fear, doubt, despair, hurt, darkness, and worry to bring. God wants each of us—from the lowly to the well-to-do, from the seasoned believer to the first-time church goer—to bring those meager and all-too-common problems and marvel as God exchanges them for something truly remarkable, neat, and praiseworthy. We can exchange our fear for joy. Fear is a basic emotion caused by a perceived threat. Joy is a deep sense of happiness and pleasure that is a gift from the Holy Spirit, which is rooted in God's promises and presence, rather than in worldly possessions or achievements.

Topic: Fear is one of the motivations for obeying Yahweh. Obligation is another, but love is the best motivation for obeying Yahweh. The one motivated by fear is a slave of God. The one motivated by obligation is a friend of God. The one motivated by love is an heir of God. We should embrace our status as co-heirs of Christ, never settling for fearful or obligatory obedience.

- Isn't the fear of Yahweh good? See Proverbs 1:7, 3:7, 9:10, 10:27, 14:27, 15:16, 15:33, 22:4.
- What is it that switches when Jesus calls us friends instead of slaves? See John 15:12-17.
- Why should fear give way to love? See 1 John 4:15-21.
- How do we become heirs of God? See Romans 8:12-17.

Association: You can learn a lot about someone by learning their fears and by noticing their joy.

- What was your biggest fear? Do you still have it, or have you gotten over it?
- Do you fear divine judgment?
- Why do you suppose so many Christians do fear judgment?
- How do you summarize the Enemy, Slave, Friend, Heir progression? Focus on the gospel and on the importance of embracing joy over fear.

Guidance: It's easy to allow fear to creep back in. Let's focus on the joy-producing truth instead.

- What is the Holy Spirit's role in all this? How does He remind us of the joyful truth?
- What steps should we take when we start to fear divine retribution?
- What tips, tricks, or techniques do you like to employ to keep the joyful truth top of mind?
- Encourage one another to internalize this concept and to work it into our gospel presentations.
- Confess your tendencies to slip back into fearful obedience and receive encouragement to shift our motivation for obedience. Pray with and for one another.