

The Mystery of the Incarnation

by Paul Anderson

Joseph had waited nine painful months. The child's real Father had been waiting since before the creation of the world. Now the fullness of time had come. That is what makes it hard. We somehow expect God to do things differently.

John speaks the truth in five powerful words: *"And the Word became flesh"* (John 1:14). You've heard of chili con carne, chili with flesh, with meat. Here is God con carne. He had lived forever in unapproachable light. No one had ever seen Him. He had been with His Father in creation, and then He became a part of it. Incredible that the designer of the universe would move among His creation—and that He would not even be recognized. That is because He came as a baby, not super-God. The Mighty One showed up—incognito.

He took on flesh. The untouchable could now be touched. The one who inhabits eternity entered time. The one whose voice once shook the earth cooed in the hearing of human ears. The one whom no one could see has been seen. He has opened himself up to sensory data. He who spans all time invaded our time-space world. As the hymn writer declared, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail incarnate deity." God had skin on. The eternal life of the Almighty has been revealed to mortal humanity. Ours is the visited planet, forever marked by the divine entry. Immanuel—God is with us. The self-sufficient one has become a dependent. Look at the vulnerability of our eighteen-inch God.

John describes it this way: *"That which was from the beginning, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—and the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us"* (1 John 1:1-2). God has become verifiable. The inscrutable has been scrutinized.

Did you catch the sense-oriented description? The Greeks said the senses were illusionary, that they could not be trusted. The Hebrews, on the other hand, were down-to-earth folk, not taken up with the abstract. So John the Hebrew tells us in graphic terms that God came within reach. The Eternal One confined Himself to a womb, a manger, an eight-pound body, a residence. As Charles Wesley wrote, "Our God contracted to a span; incomprehensibly made man." John proclaimed, *"And the life was manifested..."*

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A Flesh and Blood God

Flesh is what separates the creation from its Creator. “*God is Spirit*,” wrote John (John 4:24). We are flesh and blood. To think of the One who called all life into physical existence encasing Himself within skin and bones troubles our brain cells. It would be unthinkable to a Greek. Plutarch said it was abhorrent to involve God in the affairs of the world: “The life of God has not descended to us.” And it was blasphemous to a Jew. Yahweh had declared to Moses, “*You cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live*” (Exodus 33:20). The distance separating God and man was infinite. Man could not bridge it, and God would not.

Flesh in the Bible not only speaks of the physical part of humanity, it also stands for the whole race in its dependent, frail condition. We all share a common destiny—death. The writer of Hebrews says, “*It is appointed to man once to die*” (Hebrews 9: 27). Or as a philosopher once wrote, “Man has a strikingly high mortality rate; ten out of ten die.” Isaiah declared that “*all flesh is as grass*” (Isaiah 40:6). Flesh is contrasted to spirit, to things eternal. To say that Jesus became flesh says that He entered this frail human race. He was “*found in human form*” (Philippians 2:8). To enter a virgin’s womb and be suspected of illegitimacy was a step down for divinity.

Every religion attempts to make man spiritual; Christianity makes God physical. We give it our best religious effort so we can ascend to God. Instead, God bends down to us. We want to reach the heights, but God descends to the depths. Our futile strivings to reach Him by zealous works are in vain, but in faith we can recognize that He has come. The destiny of the human race was implanted in the uterine wall of a virgin girl.

Jesus went from everything to nothing. St. Paul says that “*though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor*” (2 Corinthians 8:9). Elsewhere Paul says that Jesus “*emptied himself*” (Philippians 2:7). He went from eternal wealth to personal poverty. He had His earthly beginning in back of an overcrowded motel.

Then He grew. Luke says, “*...and Jesus increased*” (Luke 2:52). He experienced the same kind of growth pattern that takes place in every human being. He went from diapers (or whatever they used in those days) to children’s clothes. He grew out of things. His sandals got too small for Him, so He got bigger ones. He “*increased in wisdom and stature*” (Luke 2:52). He grew wiser, and He grew taller.

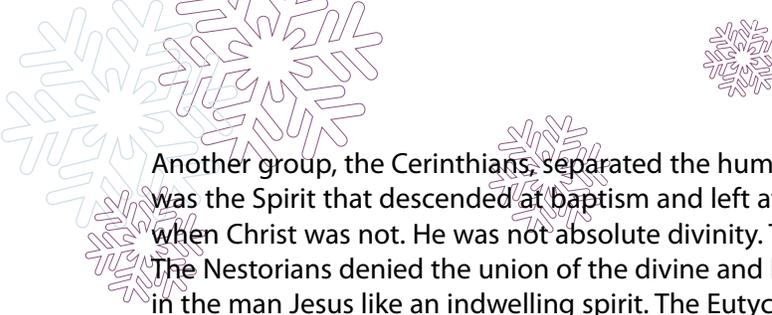
The Father did not make His Son an exception to the human race. Scripture says that “*...although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered*” (Hebrews 5:8). You might think that if He were God, Jesus could have at least side-stepped pain, such as testing out of trials. Couldn’t we say, “You did so well as a youth that you passed. No more hardships for you”? But at the end of His ministry, Jesus was still offering up prayers “*with loud cries and tears*” (Hebrews 5:7). He was a man. And He was going to the limits as a man. “*He was in every respect tempted as we are*” (Hebrews 4:15). He “*partook of the same nature*” (Hebrews 2:14), ate the same foods, suffered the same rejections, and faced the same frustrations we do.

The Difficulty

That man with flesh on was and is God. “*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*” (Colossians 1:19). God the Father packed undiminished deity into that six-foot frame. When Jesus spoke, it was God speaking. When He thought, it was the thoughts of the Ancient of Days.

Here is our problem—the God/Man. We don’t have any models. No one could present a prototype for Immanuel. There was only one, never again to be reproduced. We can handle the God idea, and we can deal with a really good man, but putting both in the same person stretches us. That is why sects do weird things with the concept. The Ebionites of the early second century believed Christ was endowed with supernatural powers at His baptism. They asserted, like the Jews did, that Jesus’ deity was incompatible with monotheism. Docetists said Christ appeared to have a body but really didn’t. Others said He had a real body, but denied it was material. Greeks understood matter to be inherently evil.

Christianity
makes God
physical.



Another group, the Cerinthians, separated the human Jesus from the divine Christ. They say Christ was the Spirit that descended at baptism and left at the cross. The Arians believed there was a time when Christ was not. He was not absolute divinity. The Apollinarians denied Christ's human nature. The Nestorians denied the union of the divine and human natures of Christ. They said the Logos dwelt in the man Jesus like an indwelling spirit. The Eutychians, on the other hand, said Christ was divine, body and all.

Present-day cults repeat these early church heresies in one form or another. The Jehovah's Witnesses deny the virgin birth and the physical resurrection. The Mormons say Jesus was less than God but was exalted to become equal with the Father. Liberalism emphasizes the man Jesus, the perfect model, not the God/Man who rescues us from sin. Christian Science believes matter is an illusion and must be overcome by the spirit—Jesus is the human man and Christ is the divine idea. St. John identified all such heresies as the spirit of the antichrist because they do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (I John 4:2).

At the very center of Christianity is this proclamation: *"The Word became flesh."* We didn't and we couldn't get up to God—He came down to us. Paul writes, *"Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion: He was manifest in the flesh"* (I Timothy 3:16). He tells the Colossians that Jesus *"has now reconciled (them) in his body of flesh by his death"* (Colossians 1:22). Peter writes that Jesus was *"put to death in the flesh"* (I Peter 3:18). God put on skin—and He still has it. He told the startled disciples at one of His resurrection appearances, *"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have"* (Luke 24:39). The person on the throne next to the Father is Jesus—and He is a man. When we get to heaven, we will see scars to prove it. Paul wrote, *"For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"* (I Timothy 2:5). Bethlehem says a mighty **"Amen"** to the promise of Immanuel, and a resounding **"No"** to every teaching that makes Jesus either less than God or more than man. He is both.

So What?

"The Word became flesh."

John 1:14

Why the big deal? What is at stake? Only the eternal salvation of humanity! We sinned. We carry the death penalty over our heads. God doesn't. He is holy so we must die. But if we die, we die as sinners, separated in eternity as in time from the God who created us to know Him. God had no penalty to pay so He could die as our substitute, but only because He was a part of our race.

Therefore, *"since the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is the devil"* (Hebrews 2:14). Because He was God, He could defeat the devil, who was stronger than we. Because He was man, He could step into the race and begin a new destiny as the second Adam. A man alone could not represent both sides. Jesus, the God/Man, brought both together.

Jesus took on flesh and blood—the Father didn't. People who casually say they know God, referring to Him as the man upstairs, are in for a big surprise. No man can see God and live. Unless they have come to God through Jesus Christ, the awesome holiness of the unapproachable God will cause them to shudder in terror for all eternity. No one in the Old Testament thought it possible to see God—He was too removed, too different, too distant. And that is the God Jesus came to tell us about. John writes, *"No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known"* (John 1:18). Jesus came to tell us about Yahweh God. He explained Him to us. Those who glibly say, "I am ready to meet my Maker," have no idea of the absolutely blinding holiness, the inexpressible splendor and glory of the invisible, immortal God. Only the God/Man can bring us into His presence, and Jesus took on flesh to make the way.

"He that has seen me has seen the Father."

John 14:9

Plato said, "Never man and God can meet." He was wrong. Celsus scoffed at the way Christians called God their Father, because "God is way beyond everything." He was wrong too. Isaiah prophesied that a child would be born, a son given. One of His names would be "Mighty God." He became the meeting place of the divine and the human. He brings the two together.

A Sunday school teacher asked her class to draw a picture from the gospels. When she asked one boy what he was drawing, he said, "God." So she explained, "But no one has seen Him. We don't know what God looks like." To which the boy replied, "We will when I get done."

Jesus came to us and identified with us. Do you suffer? So did Jesus. Do you feel cramped? So did He, especially on the cross. Do you ever feel lonely? Jesus did too, and He felt forsaken. God didn't look down on our mess and say, "I've had it with you." He came down and got involved. He lived among us in Jesus, and He suffered and died. He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. He said to Philip, "He that has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). When He got done, we knew what God looked like—

Jesus!

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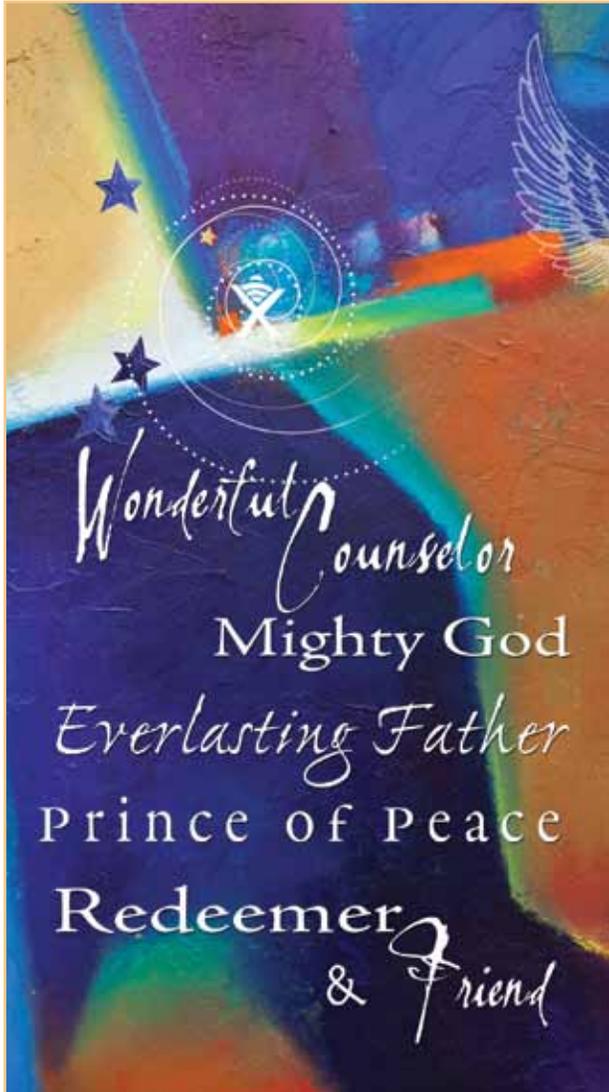
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