

The Incarnation in the Incarnation

Introduction

a. objectives

1. subject – The incarnation of Jesus establishes the incarnation of the church, also his body
2. aim – To cause us to know that we belong to the Incarnate One as a member of his eternal body
3. passage – Colossians 1:15-20

b. outline

1. The Centrality of the Incarnation
2. The Characteristics of the Incarnation (Colossians 1:15-20)
3. The Incarnation in the Incarnation (Colossians 1:18a)

c. overview

1. the **place** of this Christmas message
 - a. Christmas Eve 2023 – a celebration of the true nature of Christmas
 - b. **like most:** not *just* a celebration of:
 1. the birth of a *child* – as in every other birthday celebration
 2. the birth of a *great historical figure* – someone who had a deep impact on the world
 3. the birth of a *great teacher* – someone upon whom we can model our lives (an *example*)
 4. the birth of a *Savior* – someone who “opened the gates of heaven” that we might enter in
 - c. but ... (**for us!**) Christmas is a celebration of the **Incarnation of the Son of God**
 1. the entry of the infinite, all-glorious, eternal, all-powerful, Creator God into the very universe he had formed, robing himself in flesh, and becoming as a man, to live among us (**Emmanuel**)
 - a. **e.g.** the very *Creator* who challenged Job to explain how the universe worked
 2. **i.e.** God *condescended* to veil his glory in human flesh, adding to his divine nature a *human nature*, and *willingly chose* to live this life in a world of evil and death, even to death on a cross
 - d. **LOW:** what we celebrate is *far more* than the birth of a child, an historical figure, an example, or (even!) a Savior – we celebrate on this day **the in-breaking of God himself into human history**
2. the **content** of this Christmas message
 - a. **custom:** to consider some “aspect” of the Incarnation from one unique perspective *in the hope* that it “elevates” our appreciation for what the Triune God did in it ...

I. The Centrality of the Incarnation

Content

a. the Incarnation as central to the Apostle Paul

1. the Apostle Paul clearly believed that Jesus was *fully God* – the crucified carpenter from Nazareth, the one whose followers in Damascus believed was raised from the dead, the “leader” of the church that he was going N to destroy, was (in fact!) the fullness of God
 - a. Saul of Tarsus, like *all Jews* of his day, was **fiercely monotheistic** = the exiles in Assyria, Babylon, and Persia, along with subjugation to the Greeks and Romans, had taught the Jews that there was (is!) *only one God*, Yahweh – and, all other “gods” were fictions
 - b. thus, Saul believed that the “Christians” in Damascus were *perverting* monotheism by embracing Jesus as a “demi-god”, and it was up to him (a faithful rabbi) to destroy this *polytheistic sect*
 - c. however, on the road there, Saul encountered the Risen Jesus, the very man he had “dismissed”
 1. not as a stranger on the side of the road, but in the fullness of his glory from heaven
 2. a glory that literally *blinded* him – a glory that could only be *from God himself*
 3. thus ... when asking who he is (**i.e.** knowing that it is *God* speaking), the voice answers “*Jesus, whom you are persecuting*” (**Acts 9:5**)
 - d. so, in that moment ... Saul became a **Trinitarian** – one who recognizes (as a revelation *in Jesus*) that the One True God is a single Being (with one eternal nature, decree, power) eternally coexisting in three divine Persons (Father, Son, and Spirit), each possessing the fullness of God
 1. and (therefore!), the Jesus he *formerly* “dismissed” as nothing but a crucified carpenter was (in fact!) *the very nature of God* walking on earth *in human flesh* (**i.e. the God-man**)
 2. thus, Saul came to understand that his *monotheistic* view of God *included* the reality that the *one True God* was also *three distinct Persons*, each unique, yet fully God
 3. **IMO:** this realization probably took time (**i.e.** 14 years in Tarsus; **Galatians 2:1**)

2. the Apostle Paul incorporated this teaching of Jesus as *fully God* into his writings – his encounter with Jesus *radically altered* his theology (adding a *Christology* to it), and his writings demonstrate it:
 - a. **e.g.** he speaks *directly* to the deity of Christ in a number of places:
 1. **Romans 8:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:5-11** (the **Carmen Christi**)
 - b. **e.g.** he also *alludes* to the deity of Christ by virtue of what is *attributed* to him:
 1. monotheistic OT passages applied *directly* to Jesus (**Romans 10:13; 1 Corinthians 1:31**)
 - c. **e.g.** Paul (often) *forms his teaching* around the reality that Jesus is God:
 1. in **Colossians 1:15-20**, he bases the entirety of his advice to the Colossian believers *on the nature of Jesus as God in flesh ... (which we read earlier)*

II. The Characteristics of the Incarnation (Colossians 1:15-20)

Content

a. the characteristics of the One who was incarnated

1. Paul *describes* Jesus in “incarnational” (**ontological**) terms (**i.e.** who he *is* determining what he *does*)
 - a. **note:** although the pericope begins with “*he*”, it is obvious that Paul is referring to *Jesus*, based on the antecedents in **1:3-4, 7, & 13**, and the reference to “*his cross*” in **1:20**
 - b. **v. 15a** – he is the “*image of the invisible God*” = he possesses the *substance* of God *in visible form*
 - c. **v. 15b** – he is the “*firstborn of all creation*” = he is the *reason* for everything that exists in the world
 1. not a “deified” *creature*, but the One *to which* everything points (**JWs, see next**)
 - d. **v. 16** – he created all things = by him everything is made (**e.g.** everything God points out to Job)
 1. and everything is created “*through him*” (**i.e.** by his *eternal* power) and “*for him*” (**i.e.** to glorify him above everything that is created)
 - e. **v. 17a** – he is “*before*” all things = 1) he *preexists* all things, or 2) he is *more glorious* than all else
 - f. **v. 17b** – he “*all things hold[s] together*” = he *sustains* the universe and governs its order
 1. **e.g. Cary:** the helpless baby in the manger held together the manger (and world!) below him
 - g. **v. 18b** – he is the “*the firstborn from the dead*” = the first human to rise as the “*beginning*” of the great plan of redemption (**i.e.** the *purpose* of his Incarnation)
 - h. **v. 19** – (**in summary**) in Jesus the “*fullness of God*” was “*pleased*” (**i.e.** willingly) to dwell = the Son of God *willingly* (lovingly!) condescended to take on human flesh
 - i. **v. 20** – (**the point**) the Son became the *God-man* in order to “*reconcile*” other humans (**i.e.** fallen ones) “*to himself*” = the Son came *in flesh* to restore to himself those that *he himself* had created
 - j. **LOW:** Paul’s point to the Colossians: as those reconciled *by God himself in flesh*, do not allow “others” to sway you from a full and complete trust and obedience *in him* and *to him*
2. but ... Paul includes something *very interesting* (and a bit *perplexing*) **right in the middle ...**

III. The Incarnation in the Incarnation (Colossians 1:18a)

Content

a. the Incarnation as the *beginning* of “another”

1. **question:** why does Paul say that Jesus is the “*head of the body, the church*” in **v. 18**?
 - a. **i.e.** in the midst of describing the *nature* of Jesus as creator, sustainer, and redeemer, why does he make a reference to “*the body, the church*”?
 - b. **true:** he wants to make it clear that the Incarnation of Jesus makes him the *head of the church* – but why use the phrase “*the body*” to describe it – why not just say “*the head of the church*”?
 - c. **confusing:** in the midst of discussing the nature of Jesus *the man* (**i.e.** the fullness of deity dwelling in a *human being*, Jesus), Paul seems to “confuse” Jesus’ *physical body* with *the church*
 - d. **i.e.** he *needs* to add the phrase “*the church*” to *qualify* what he means by “*the body*” – not *Jesus’*
2. **answer: the Incarnation of the Son into flesh is the beginning of another “incarnation” – another reality where the presence of God indwells human flesh**
 - a. **careful:** preachers are warned to be careful about being “clever” = be careful about saying something that no one has before (**i.e.** because it’s probably wrong!)
 - b. **but, ITC:** I am convinced that it is **Paul himself** who is making this point, *purposefully* ...
3. **consider:** Paul uses “body” imagery as a description of the church in *many places* (**e.g.**):

Romans 12:4-5: “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”

1 Cor. 12:12-14, 27; most of the chap.: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”

Eph. 4:15-16: “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

Col. 2:18-19; 3:15: "Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God ... And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body."

- a. Paul teaches, *very clearly*, that the church is a *Living Organism*, a "body" in which all of us are members – each one having a different purpose, but yet part of a *single living body*
 1. this is *not* purely "metaphorical" – the language Paul uses of this "body" is not just *imagery* designed to evoke a point or show how "clever" he can be
 - a. **e.g.** Paul *does not* speak of the indwelling Spirit in us just "metaphorically" (**Romans 8:9**)
 2. rather, he takes this *literally*, describing us as the various parts (**i.e.** hands, eyes, feet, joints, ligaments, "dishonorable", etc.), not in a "theoretical" way, but as *actual parts of a living body*
 3. and, he *consistently* posits that the "Head" of this body *is Christ Jesus* (the *enfleshed-One*)
- b. so ... this body is **the dwelling place of God himself** – the Spirit of God *indwelling* the individual members of this organism, such that he is (therefore!) indwelling *the whole body* (**1 Cor. 12:13f**)
- c. **another Incarnation** = another body in which *deity* indwells, a body being "conceived" (even now!) from individuals of every tribe, tongue, and nation throughout the world
 1. the first Incarnation was of the Son of God robing himself in the flesh of a man in the womb of the Virgin, and then living *as both God and man* on the earth to accomplish the will of the Godhead in redeeming a people for himself
 2. the second "incarnation" is of the Spirit of God "robing" himself in the flesh of the *church*, living *in us* both individually and corporately – the Spirit of God living in us to accomplish the will of the Godhead in calling forth *individuals* to join this *organism* by faith in *the First Man*
 3. **i.e.** as if the God-man, Jesus the *embodied Risen One*, ascended *in his glorified body* back to the Father's right hand, and sent the Spirit to *complete* his Incarnation in the world by forming *another body* in which deity would dwell, **side-by-side deity and humanity**
 4. **i.e.** a body *raised from the dead* individually (in regeneration) and *corporately* from the "dust" of a race that has died in its sin – a "person" raised up from the dust of sin and death
 5. or (**IMO**)... the body of a *bride* (**Rev. 19:7; 21:9; 22:17**) drawn together by the Spirit, given by the Father to the Son, to be his everlasting joy (**e.g.** as Eve was given to Adam)
4. **the Incarnation of the Son into human flesh makes him the Head of the church – by virtue of his birth as a man, he is the Living Head of a new body in which his Spirit dwells**
 - a. we don't just celebrate the birth of a child or an example or (even!) a Savior – we celebrate that God has entered into his own creation, first as an *exalted* God-man, and then as the church
 - b. we celebrate that **we are a part of him** – not just *theoretically*, but *physically* – joined with him in a new body, side-by-side with the Spirit, as the ultimate glory of God's eternal purpose
 - c. **may Christmas be a wonderful reminder to you of his coming – which (at first!) redeemed us through his broken body, but now sustains us together through his risen body**