

6. The Logos Incarnate (1:14-18)

To this point in his prologue John has provided an astonishing portrait of the Logos and His relationship to God, the creation and especially the world of men. The point of departure for his depiction was the time (so to speak) before creation when only God existed. John then showed the Logos' direct role in creation and the immanent relationship He's maintained with the created order ever since. And finally, John set the stage for the Logos' incarnational coming by highlighting, through his introduction of the Baptist, the purpose and significance of this coming.

The incarnation, then, must first be understood in terms of prophetic fulfillment. Yahweh had promised a future theophany through which He would accomplish His restorative purpose for His creation (a purpose to be realized through Israel as the Abrahamic seed). Israel's King was coming to end the exile – the creation's as well as Israel's – and this called for a herald. At the appointed time, the Spirit revealed that John the Baptist was this herald, so that his birth signaled that Yahweh's theophany (with all it entailed and implied) was at hand (ref. again Luke 1:11-17, 57-79). And so, by situating the Baptist at the threshold of his announcement of the Logos' incarnational coming, John was emphasizing that this coming of the Logos was the coming of Yahweh as He had promised through His prophets. But the prophets were adamant that this theophany had a very specific purpose: *The Lord was coming into the world to liberate and restore His captive people, but in order that Zion should be restored and fill the whole earth.*

Thus the incarnation's significance resides not in the phenomenon itself, but in its purpose and effect. The dynamics of the *hypostatic union* (the conjunction of deity and humanness in the one person of Jesus of Nazareth) tends to dominate discussions of the incarnation and this issue is certainly important. But considered in itself apart from its purpose and outcome, the hypostatic union, for all its mystery and glory, becomes effectively meaningless. It sits in isolation as nothing more than an astonishing divine miracle – a miracle that begs the response, “so what?”

This is precisely why John introduced the incarnation the way he did; by the time he got to his declaration, “The Logos became flesh...,” he'd framed that event such that his readers would have no reason to ask, “so what?” John's presentation of the Logos set the stage for his declaration in verse 14 and it is this declaration – understood in terms of the larger prologue – that provides the lens for reading John's account. Just as 1:14 cannot be treated in a vacuum as a theological or christological proof-text, so one cannot read John's gospel account except in terms of this verse as it is situated within and interpreted by the surrounding prologue.

- a. John's announcement of the incarnate Logos is succinct, and yet pregnant with content and significance. It consists of four fundamental components related to the theme of incarnation: the *nature* of incarnation, its *intent*, its *effect* and its *significance*.
 - 1) The first issue, then, is the nature of the incarnation: the Logos *becoming flesh*. While the fact of the incarnation is almost universally accepted among professing Christians, multitudes have never really considered just what it entailed. Typically the consideration goes no further than acknowledging the mysterious phenomenon of God somehow coming into the natural world as a human being.

Beyond this basic understanding, people differ widely as to what the incarnation actually entailed. Things become especially difficult when the concepts of nature, person, will, etc. are introduced into the discussion. One need only consider the christological controversies of the Church's early era to prove the point.

Ultimately the question of how one human person – undivided and unconflicted – could be fully God (1:1) and fully man at the same time is unanswerable because this state was a singularity point without precedent or counterpart. It occurred in only one instance as an entirely supernatural phenomenon. The incarnation transcended natural laws and phenomena and so its explanation lies outside of human experience and human capacity to discern. Human beings could *observe* the incarnation in the person of Jesus, but they cannot analyze or fully explain it.

Thus it's not surprising that the Church has historically focused primarily on this matter of the hypostatic union, evident in the myriad hypotheses and formulations that have been proposed concerning it. This issue isn't irrelevant, but there's a more important subsidiary issue that few Christians ever consider. And that is the matter of the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth – specifically, the fact of His *Adamic nature* as a son of Adam. Two related factors seem to have most contributed to this critical truth being obscured and overlooked.

- The first is the Church's understandable emphasis on *Jesus' sinlessness*. This issue has always been in the forefront for the simple reason that Jesus' work of atonement (at least as biblically conceived) demands a spotless sacrifice and therefore a sinless substitute. Jesus' sinlessness is non-negotiable in orthodox Christianity, with the result that the Church has tended to formulate conceptions of Jesus' humanness which would absolutely preclude any question of His complete "separation from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). So, for instance, one sees this concern reflected in the ongoing debate among Christians regarding Jesus being *tempted* (Matthew 4:1; Hebrews 2:18, 4:15) and what His temptations indicate or imply about the possibility of Him actually sinning.

- Throughout its history the Church has found various ways to explain and uphold Jesus' sinless humanity and therefore His distinction from other men. One view which predominated from the early Christian period eventually came to be known as the doctrine of the *Immaculate Conception*. The prevalence of this view in the Western (Latin) Church is attested in the fact that it obtained the status of official dogma in the Catholic Church in the mid-nineteenth century. Many non-Catholics believe this doctrine refers to Jesus' conception, but it actually pertains to *Mary*; it maintains that Mary was herself conceived free of original sin (i.e., the sin nature all people inherit from Adam by natural descent), thereby allowing her to pass along to her Son a human nature unspotted by any sort of corruption. The effect of this doctrine is that it separates Jesus from Adam's humanity, so that He is not a son of Adam as other men are.

Jesus' human identity as a bona fide son of Adam is critically important to the purpose and work of the incarnation, and yet it rarely gets any attention, even in discussions of the atonement itself. And where the issue does come up, the tendency is actually to deny Jesus' Adamic nature because of concerns that it somehow argues against His sinlessness; *if Jesus was a son of Adam as all other men are, doesn't this imply that He shared Adam's sin nature (original sin), if not the actual sinfulness which defines every one of Adam's children?* In the minds of many Christians and Christian theologians, the apparent hazard to Jesus' sinlessness of making Him an authentic son of Adam is too great; it's better to separate Him from other men and rethink the issue of His representation than to allow Him to, in the fullest sense, "be made like His brethren in all things" (Hebrews 2:17). The result is that Jesus is all too often regarded as a unique kind of human being – a one-of-a-kind quasi-human, not a true son of Adam like all other men. (This premise underlies the oft-heard assertion that Jesus' blood had a unique atoning power because it was divine rather than human blood.)

Notwithstanding all of the concerns and objections, the Scripture insists that Jesus was fully and truly a son of Adam, *and therefore a man who bore in Himself the substance of fallen humanness*. Like every other human being, Jesus was subject to the fall and its effects, the most obvious of which is mortality; Jesus' death at Calvary is the great proof that He was a bona fide son of Adam. As such, He was subject to all of the influences and pressures of human existence in a fallen world, but without yielding to them: *"He was tempted in every way as we are, but without sin."* This means that Jesus was characterized by absolute and perpetual antithesis to the Adamic nature He possessed. At every point, in every way, and at all times, He contradicted, opposed and withstood the flesh into which He was conceived. *This highlights a critical issue that is commonly missed, which is that Jesus' work of atonement only culminated with His death at Calvary; that work began with His conception and continued throughout His earthly life.*

- Jesus' life as a man was His own personal triumph over man as fallen; His triumph became the *world's* triumph with His substitutionary death and resurrection (cf. Isaiah 53 with John 3:14-17, 6:32-33, 48-58, 12:20-32).
- And Jesus' death was substitutionary precisely because, as a man, He shared the same nature as His fellow men. He bore their brokenness in Himself as a son of Adam on behalf of Adam's race (Hebrews 2:14-18).

"One thing should be abundantly clear, that if Jesus Christ did not assume our fallen flesh, our fallen humanity, then our fallen humanity is untouched by His work – for 'the unassumed is the unredeemed,' as Gregory Nazianzen put it... If the Word of God did not really come into our fallen existence, if the Son of God did not actually come where we are and join himself to us and range himself with us where we are in sin and under judgment, how could it be said that Christ really took our place, took our cause upon himself in order to redeem us?"

(Incarnation, T. F. Torrance)

2) The incarnate Logos took upon Himself our fallen humanity, not for the sake of condemnation and destruction, but deliverance, purgation and ingathering. *The purpose for incarnation was the restoration and perfection of communion* – first with man, the image-son, but then with the created order through him: The Logos who became flesh “*dwelt among us.*” John’s language here is important, for it alludes to the sanctuary as God’s dwelling place. In effect, John was observing that the incarnate Logos *tabernacled* among men, an idea that sets the tone for his larger account which emphasizes the restoration of Yahweh’s sanctuary in the person of Jesus. In Him, Yahweh had returned and was again enthroned in Zion.

- God’s intimate presence in the midst of His people was His original design for His creation and was introduced and exemplified in the first creation.
- This principle of *Immanuel* is the essential feature of God’s kingdom and so was the focal point of the Israelite kingdom (cf. Genesis 17:1ff with Exodus 15:17-18, 25:1-8; also Hebrews 7:11-12). What made the Israelite kingdom *Yahweh’s* kingdom was His enthroned presence in His sanctuary in the midst of His people (1 Chronicles 28:1-3; Psalm 80:1, 99:1-5).
- Thus, when Yahweh departed His sanctuary, it signaled to Israel the demise of the kingdom and the beginning of their exile. And regardless of physical and historical circumstances, Israel’s exile wouldn’t end – and the kingdom would not be re-established – until Yahweh returned to Zion (cf. Isaiah 40, 59-60; Ezekiel 10 with 43:1-5; Zechariah 1-2, 8; etc.).
- And the Lord promised just that; He would return to Zion – not as a visitor, but in order to dwell in her forever. But this meant that His dwelling place – His sanctuary – had to be restored and prepared for His arrival. The first task was to rebuild the temple; then it would need to be cleansed because of Jewish apostasy and Gentile defilement. (The Jews expected Messiah to cleanse the sanctuary when He came; it was in view of that conviction that the Qumran community abandoned the temple and its ministrations and withdrew to the desert to wait for the Messiah.)

The restoration of the sanctuary was about Yahweh’s return to Zion to dwell in her midst forever. And His return would mean the conjoining of heaven and earth (Isaiah 66:1-2) – the recovery of sacred space such that men would have a place to encounter the living God (Isaiah 2:1ff; Micah 4:1-2; Haggai 2:1-9; Zechariah 2, 8:18ff, 14:1ff). The Jews likely expected this to replicate the past: the Lord’s glory cloud descending upon and filling the temple. Instead, and in a way no one could have predicted or even imagined, it had occurred in the incarnation. Heaven and earth were conjoined substantially and permanently in the Logos becoming flesh. In Jesus, Yahweh had returned to Zion in order to destroy the subjugating power, liberate and regather her children, restore her desolation and re-establish His throne in her midst. He had fulfilled His word and ushered in His everlasting kingdom; as with all of His promises, this one, too, was “*yea and amen*” in Jesus.