Chapter 4

Son of God/Son of David

The idea that Jesus Christ is both son of David according to the flesh and Son of God according to the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:3–4) developed into the doctrines of the Incarnation, Christology, and, by extension, the Trinity. The Incarnation is the critical issue that separates Christianity from Judaism and Islam. The idea of the holy God taking on human flesh came as a blasphemous idea to first-century Judaism, and that verdict Islam has confirmed. This understanding of Jesus Christ as Son of God and son of David, divine and human, poses one of the greatest scandals of Christianity.

Modern scholarship has questioned whether Jesus ever represented himself as anything other than an itinerant rabbi calling people to repent. This line of thought ascribes the incarnational Christological teachings of the church as a creation of the apostles after the death of Jesus. Such an approach rests on a skeptical view of the reliability of the Gospel accounts of what Jesus actually taught, did, or represented himself to be. The response of the authorities to Jesus, however, suggests that they understood him to have blasphemed God by how he represented his relationship to God. The Sanhedrin condemned Jesus and handed him over to the Romans on a charge of blasphemy (Matt. 26:63–66; Mark 14:61–64; Luke 22:66–71). On earlier occasions the crowd had responded with hostility and tried to stone him because of his view of his relationship to God (John 8:58–59; 10:30–39). In other words, Jesus alarmed a great many people by the way he spoke of himself in relation to God, and he eventually suffered the consequences.[1]

With respect to other religions, however, the idea of deity taking human form does not seem strange. The *Bhagavad Gita* relates the story of the god Krishna, who took human form as a chariot driver for a warrior. But in Hinduism, though the gods have many

avatars or manifestations, they do not partake of humanity, experiencing neither birth nor death.

Ancient Egypt regarded the pharaoh as a god dwelling in their midst. In modern times Japan has regarded the emperor as divine. The succession of monarchs over thousands of years represented the continuity of divine favor. The Romans had a much briefer experience of lunatic rulers who ascribed divinity to themselves. For the Egyptians and Japanese, the royal expression of divinity represented "god with us."

Among the mythologies of ancient Rome and Greece, as well as the mythologies of northern Europe, the gods frequently manifested themselves among humans, often for purposes of sexual entanglement. Zeus, Jupiter, and Wotan produced a troop of human offspring who animated the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Ring*. Mighty heroes though the offspring might have been, they did not share the nature and being of their sire. While the gods may have manifested themselves for the purpose of debauchery, they were never human. Christianity, by contrast, teaches that Jesus Christ shares the nature and being of God and that he was fully human.

Because of its affinity with the mythic accounts of divine visitation in human form, a number of scholars have taken the position that the Christian story of God's coming into the world through Jesus falls under the category of myth. Rudolph Bultmann championed the mythic nature of the stories about Jesus.[2] More recently a group of scholars explored this theme in a collaborative work, *The Myth of God Incarnate*.[3] While these schools of thought saw the affinity with myth as a reason for discounting any correlation to reality about the stories of the incarnation of Christ, an alternative view has come forward based on the same observations. J. R. R. Tolkien, the English philologist and scholar of Nordic mythology, argued in his famous evangelistic encounters with C. S. Lewis that the stories of Jesus and the Incarnation were most certainly myth, but they were the myth that actually happened. In the birth of Jesus the mythologies of the world's religions found fulfillment. This understanding proved to be a turning point in the long conversion of Lewis. As a student of classical mythology, Lewis later observed that the myths of divine visitation are a "real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination."[4]

The importance of the Incarnation might even be detected in religious traditions that do not incorporate mythologies of divine manifestation in human form. While the Buddhist tradition has no place for the manifestation of God since it affirms no self-conscious supreme being, it exalts the primary concept and logic of incarnation, if such a being existed. In the story of Gotama and how he became the Buddha, the necessary fact of his progress was the act of leaving his palace home and the security his royal father provided. In a sense, Buddha was a type of Christ and the Incarnation. Both entered a world of suffering. Only through entering an alien world and experiencing it could they be of help to others. In this sense, the incarnation of Jesus Christ fulfills the concerns of Buddhist thought.

Unlike the divine visitations of other religions, the doctrine of the Incarnation in Christianity makes a profound statement about the value of personhood and individual identity. This affirmation finds further confirmation in the resurrection of individual persons and the completing of their perfection by the Spirit. This notion contrasts sharply with belief systems such as Hinduism and Buddhism, where the loss of personhood represents the ideal.

The New Testament elaborates several ways in which the Incarnation represented good news for people. Jesus Christ as Son of God and son of David had implications for salvation that moved on several planes. Because of the inherent affirmation of the physical world by the Incarnation, however, the good news of Jesus Christ has implications for the physical as well as the spiritual well-being of people.

BIBLICAL BACKGROUND

Long before the church had developed doctrines of the Incarnation or Christology, the church proclaimed Jesus as Son of God and son of David. *Kerygma* and *didache* grew up together as the church both proclaimed that God had come in the flesh and struggled to explain what that assertion meant. For different audiences the apostles explained the significance of the Incarnation from different perspectives. That is, how they explained the person of Christ had more to do with their audience than with them. At issue was the

question Jesus had raised at Caesarea Philippi: "Who do you say I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Matthew and Luke approached the issue in terms of the fulfillment of Scripture, describing the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus before elaborating the implications of his coming. John and Paul, on the other hand, ignored the circumstances of the birth of Jesus as they described the Incarnation theologically in terms of its meaning in life for people.

The Gospels

The Evangelists wrote the Gospels from the perspective of faith in the One who had risen from the dead. Any discussion of their notion of the Incarnation or Christology must proceed from the conclusion of the Gospels rather than from the beginning. After the resurrection, the followers of Jesus testified to him as "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Modern scholarship has tended to neglect the significance of the experience of the resurrection in assessing the sense in which the Gospel writers understood the relationship between Jesus Christ and God. While the modern world concerns itself with the problem of how a human being could be divine, the first generation church had an entirely different problem. After the resurrection, they had to make a case for the humanity of Christ!

Bultmann and others have proceeded from the assumption that the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke were creations of the early church to establish the divine origin of Jesus.[5] Mark and John, however, present the divine relationship of Jesus and God without recourse to the account of his birth. Other writers of the New Testament present unambiguously high Christologies without mentioning the birth of Jesus. Rather than proving the divinity of Christ, the birth narratives function to demonstrate that the One who rose from the dead was fully and truly human in addition to his divine relationship.[6] Unlike the mythologies of the ancient world that pictured divine visitations in human form and the endless cycle of nature gods who died and rose with the seasons, Jesus Christ was fully human from birth to death in spite of his relationship to God which was made evident by the resurrection.

The Gospels proceed from the assumption that the Christ who arose is divine. They collect witnesses who name Jesus as Son of God. In the birth narratives, the angels announce the divine origin

of the infant (Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:32). At the baptism (Matt. 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22; cf. John 1:32–34) and at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:5; Mark 9:7; Luke 9:35), the Synoptic Gospels indicate that God bore witness to Jesus as the Son of God. In the temptation, Satan acknowledged his divine identity (Matt. 4:3, 6; Luke 4:3, 9). The demons who were subject to his authority declared his relationship to God (Mark 3:11; cf. 5:7). Even before the resurrection, those closest to him began to believe in his divine origin (Matt. 16:16; cf. Mark 8:29; Luke 9:20; John 11:27). This growing issue of his identity formed the central charge against him by the religious authorities (Mark 14:61–62). And even his death led one of his Roman executioners to wonder at his origin (Mark 15:39).

Though the Synoptics proceed from the assumption of the deity of Christ and give evidence to support their view, their accounts of Jesus focus on his human experiences and emotions as support for the idea of a true incarnation. John's Gospel, on the other hand, proceeds with a different purpose, writing to prove that Jesus is the Son of God (John 20:31).[7] In contrast to the lunatic emperors who claimed divinity, Jesus appears in John's Gospel as one free of the character flaws that typified the human-form gods of Asia Minor. Unlike the Synoptic writers, who nuanced their Gospels to show that Jesus Christ had really come in the flesh, John nuanced his Gospel to show qualitatively why the claims of the deity of Christ should be taken more seriously than the claims to deity by Caesar.

The Gospels describe Jesus as one who could heal all manner of illness, raise the dead, cast out demons, and perform a variety of "signs and wonders." The miracles appear as evidence of his divine origin and relationship to God, for through them Jesus exercised authority that could only be credited to God.[8] Besides healing, Jesus also forgave sin (Matt. 9:4–8; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20–21). In connection with healing on the Sabbath, Jesus declared himself "Lord of the Sabbath" (Matt. 12:1–13; Mark 2:23–3:6; Luke 6:1–11). He indicated that these manifestations of power and authority formed the evidence that he was "the one who was to come" (Matt. 11:1–6; Luke 7:18–23; cf. 4:16–21). John's Gospel reports that at the Last Supper, Jesus pointed to his miracles as a demonstration of his relationship to the Father (John 14:8–11).

The Gospels also depict Jesus as someone subject to all the effects of human frailty. He wept, he hungered, he thirsted, he grew tired, he slept, he ate. His birth and death unmistakably place Jesus in the mass of humanity. By his baptism, Jesus identified with humanity. In his temptation, he was revealed as one who labored under the weight of humanity and had the true experience of temptation. Temptation came not only in the desert following his baptism (Matt. 4:1–11; Mark 1:12–13; Luke 4:1–13), but also following Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:21–23; Mark 8:31–33) and in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–42; Mark 14:32–40; Luke 22:39–44). In their accounts of temptation, the Gospels particularly portray the anguish of Jesus until the temptation passes. In all the cases, the temptation took the form of avoiding the path to the cross, the path to death. Thus, the essential temptation was not to have a true incarnation. By avoiding death, Jesus would not have experienced true humanity.

Christ's temptation must be seen in the context of his mission. Apart from it, the human/divine relationship of Christ has no meaning. The Gospels indicate that Jesus had a keen sense of mission. According to Matthew 4:17, he began his public preaching following his temptation in the desert with the message, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." The advent of the kingdom came in the ministry of Jesus (Matt. 4:23–24; Mark 3:7–12; Luke 4:18).[9] He went about his ministry as someone who had a crucial job to do, and everything depended on his completing that job (John 5:36; 9:4–5). He expressed that mission in a variety of ways in different circumstances:

- For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:10)
- I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10b)
- "The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
  because he has anointed me
  to preach good news to the poor.
  He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
  and recovery of sight for the blind,
  to release the oppressed,
  to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."
  (Luke 4:18–19)

- I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32; cf. Matt. 9:13; Mark 2:17)

All four Gospels agree that the death of Jesus formed the culmination and completion of his mission, and they ascribe this interpretation of the mission to Jesus, especially in the Passion predictions (Matt. 16:21–28; 17:22–23; 20:18–19; Mark 8:31; 9:9, 31; 10:33–34; Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31–33; cf. John 3:14; 8:28; 10:11; 12:31–33). The anguish of Gethsemane suggests a mission that only Jesus could complete, for it was a cup only he could drink (Matt. 26:42; Mark 14:35–36; Luke 22:42–44). The divine mission was accomplished through a human life and death.

General Apostolic Writings

While the Gospels have a point of view about the divine/human relationship of Jesus, they primarily narrate his story. In the letters, on the other hand, little narration occurs. In these books, the early followers of Jesus explain the significance of the divine and the human coming together in Jesus. Several major themes that relate to the Incarnation recur in the New Testament literature.

Identification. Through Jesus, God identified with the human race. Paul described Christ as exchanging wealth for poverty for the sake of the human race (2 Cor. 8:9). Despite his divine form, Christ fully identified with the human race to the ultimate human experience of death (Phil. 2:5–8). The idea of God's taking on human frailty and experiencing true humanity has enormous implications for how God views people. By virtue of living the life of a human being all the way to death, Jesus Christ brings to the Godhead the experiential knowledge of the human race. Hebrews stresses that Christ "partook of the same nature" as people in order to face the death they face (Heb. 2:14–15). As a result of complete identification with the human race, Christ has a capacity for mercy and help to people that arises from sharing human suffering and temptation (2:16–18). Unlike the mythical avatars of the ancient religions, the followers of Jesus stressed that he had fully identified with the human race (1 John 5:6).

Reconciliation. By virtue of his full identification with the human race through Christ, God brought reconciliation with humanity.

Christianity presupposes an alienation of God and humanity that has its cause in human rejection of God. Even religions that profess a unity of all spirits address the issue of human alienation, though in terms that do not affirm physical existence. Paul taught that God took the initiative in reconciliation in Christ himself (2 Cor. 5:19). By implication, Paul stressed that the reconciliation of God and humanity forms the basis for reconciliation among people (Eph. 2:14–16). The fullness of God dwelt in Christ, and by virtue of this coexistence the alienation of the divine and human came to an end, Christ becoming the one through whom reconciliation is extended to all creation (Col. 1:19–22).

Example. While a theory of the atonement is associated with the example of Christ, the example of Christ might more properly be seen as a dimension of the Incarnation. The example of the divine emptying himself to take on the form of a servant in human likeness provided the early church with a basis for living their lives in humility, obedience, and service to others (Phil. 2:5–8). The life of Christ provided his followers with a concrete example of how to lead a life without sin or deceit. The Incarnation personified the will of God and provided people with a standard for living (1 Peter 2:21). By adopting Christ's attitude toward suffering, his followers had a basis for keeping destructive desires in perspective to the will of God (1 Peter 4:1–6). Conformity to the standard of Christ established by his teachings and his life provided his followers with a standard by which they could assess the genuineness of their profession of faith. The first followers of Jesus believed that faith in Christ should result in a life resembling the life of Christ (1 John 2:3–6).

Revelation of God. The early church believed that Jesus presented the clearest revelation of God. Hebrews begins with the assertion that Christ was a superior revelation to the prophets of Israel (Heb. 1:1–2). The signs and wonders that accompanied the ministry of Christ served as divine authentication of the ultimacy of his revelation (2:3–4). Whereas the transcendent power of God cannot be seen, Jesus could be seen. For the early church, Jesus represented God's self-disclosure (2:8b–10).

This concern for the concrete manifestation of God also formed the introduction to 1 John. In contrast with the esoteric understand-

ing of the knowledge of God offered by Gnostic conceptions of the first century, the church's point of view stressed the importance of the physical manifestation of God. This manifestation provided the first Christians with an objective basis for knowing that God had actually done something about salvation (1 John 1:1–3). Jesus gave to his followers a personal and informed knowledge of God that proceeded from his intimate relationship and identification with the Father. The Johannine letters reflect the teaching found on the lips of Jesus in John's Gospel, that those who had seen the Son had seen the Father (John 14:9; cf. 8:55; 10:30, 38); thus, to deny the manifestation of Christ in the flesh is to deny God (2 John 7–9). Since Jesus came as the full revelation of God, those who reject Jesus have rejected the clearest possible vision of the heart and character of God the Father (1 John 2:22–23; 4:2–3a). Perhaps the ultimate expression of this revelation is the depth of love it represents, for to the early church the entry of the divine into human affairs represented a sacrifice of love:

> This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. (1 John 4:9; cf. John 3:16; Rom. 5:8)

Doing what no one else could do. The apostolic literature bears consistent testimony that because of the coming together of the divine and human, Christ could do what no one else could do for the salvation of the world. His uniqueness as Son of God and son of David provided the means for accomplishing salvation.

This theme finds major expression in the Pauline letters, which declare that by sending his Son in the flesh and condemning sin in the flesh, God has done "what the law . . . weakened by the sinful nature," could not do (Rom. 8:3). That is, because of the weakened state of people bound by sin, only God could fulfill the righteousness of the law (8:4; cf. Matt. 5:17). In Galatians 4:4 Paul stresses that because of Christ's identification with those born under the law, he was able to do for people what no one else could do. Only the unique relationship of Christ to God and humanity created the means for him to serve as the "mediator" in reconciliation, God having taken the initiative in Christ to recover his own people (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

Since the destruction of death and the powers of darkness could only be accomplished by God, God chose to deliver people from the bondage of fear and death by sharing the human experience and by conquering them through Christ's death (Heb. 2:14–15). Through sharing the human experience in every respect, Christ could, as a human being, make atonement on behalf of people. And because of his divine nature, he could make sufficient atonement (2:16–18). God made perfection a concrete reality rather than a theoretical ideal by demonstrating the obedience of faith in the face of suffering and adversity (5:7–8).

The apostles boldly asserted that Christ had always been God's intended means of salvation and redemption. Although God had dealt with people in a variety of ways (Heb. 1:1), he intended to deal with the problem of sin by coming and settling matters through Christ (1 Peter 1:20). No one else could do it. Only Christ could take away sin, because only Christ had no sin of his own (1 John 3:5). He came into the world as the only One who could destroy the devil and his works. God destroyed the enemy from within the human experience (3:8).

Expression of love. All of the above-mentioned themes relate to the concrete expression of love by God. In the New Testament, love is not so much an emotion as it is an action. Love is what one does in spite of the consequences, not because of the rewards. The apostles spoke of the coming of Christ as an expression of God's love. Ultimately, love saw expression most in the cross, but the cross had no eternal significance apart from God's presence in Christ. Thus, Paul wrote that the death of Christ demonstrates the love of God rather than the love of Jesus (Rom. 5:8). For John, the Son came as a gift from God because of his love (John 3:16). God sent the Son to die in order to express love for a world that did not return that love (1 John 4:9–10). Without the Incarnation, the cross becomes a cruel story of God's allowing Jesus to suffer for the world. A faulty understanding of the Incarnation creates a faulty understanding of the Fatherhood of God. Rather than a father who stands idly by while his children are in trouble, however, the Incarnation teaches that the Father delivers the child from trouble, because "God was *in* Christ" (2 Cor. 5:19, KJV).

HISTORICAL/THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

For a period of about 350 years, a series of challenges to the proclamation of Jesus as Son of God and son of David arose within the church. The controversies generally attacked this element of the gospel in terms of either the deity, the humanity, or the natures of Christ. In the early second century, for example, the Ebionites denied the genuineness of his deity, while in the early fourth century the Arians denied the completeness of his deity. In the second century the Docetists denied the genuineness of his humanity, while in the fourth century the Apollinarians denied the completeness of his humanity. In the fifth century the Nestorians denied the genuineness of a union of his two natures, while the Eutychians denied the completeness of his two natures (see Fig. 4-A).

These controversies have been treated extensively elsewhere and need not be repeated in detail here, but a brief description of the role played by the theme of Jesus Christ as Son of God and son of David will demonstrate how one element of the gospel could form the critical theological motif for the church for an entire era.

Irenaeus

Methodologically, Irenaeus proceeded in a fashion similar to his immediate predecessors, Justin Martyr and the apologists. He demonstrated the proof of the gospel through demonstrating its fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of Israel. In his *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* he relied largely on Old Testament texts to demonstrate that Christ fulfilled the prophecies. His preoccupying theme, however, focused on how Jesus Christ as Son of God and seed of Abraham and David filled the gap between transcendent God and sinful humanity.[10]

Irenaeus oriented his exposition of the gospel around the Incarnation at a time when a Gnostic interpretation of Christianity posed a major problem. The Gnostics held that Christ could not have had a human body because of the essential evil of matter; therefore, Christ did not experience either human birth or death. Not having died, he could not have risen. This Docetic view posed a major threat to the gospel. Against it, Irenaeus stressed the necessity of God's coming in the flesh to bring salvation. Through his theology

ISSUES IN CHRISTOLOGY/INCARNATION

DEITY

Ebionites
(A.D. 107)
- Deny the Genuineness of His Deity
- Adoption

Arians
(Council of Nicea, A.D. 325)
- Deny the Completeness of His Deity
- The Son Has a Beginning

HUMANITY

Docetists
(A.D. 70–170)
- Deny the Genuineness of His Humanity
- Only Seemed to Be a Man

Apollinarians
(Council of Constantinople, A.D. 381)
- Deny the Completeness of His Humanity
- Half-Man and Half-God
- Flesh & Logos vs. Flesh & Mind

NATURES

Nestorians
(Council of Ephesus, A.D. 431)
- Divide His Person
- Two Separate Persons in Christ
- No Intrinsic Union

Eutychians
(Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451)
- Confuse His Natures
- Only One Nature After Incarnation
- From Two Natures, but in One Nature

Monarchianism	—	God in a Human Body
Dynamic Monarchianism	—	Man Adopted by God
Sabellianism	—	One God in Three Temporary Manifestations
Patripassianism	—	Jesus Identified with the Father
Monophysitism	—	Only One Nature: Divine
Monotheletism	—	Two Natures, One Will

(FIGURE 4-A)

of recapitulation, Irenaeus explained that Christ summed up all of human history, undoing the Fall.[11] He reasoned:

> So he united man with God and brought about the communion of God and man, we being unable in any otherwise to have part in incorruptibility, had it not been for His coming to us. For incorruptibility, while invisible and imperceptible, would not help us; so He became visible, that we might be taken into full communication with incorruptibility.[12]

Apart from God's coming personally in the flesh, he could not engage death or triumph over it in the resurrection. Without the resurrection and the conquest of death, people would remain subject to death. Aulén has pointed out how this emphasis of Irenaeus on the Incarnation results in a wedding with the atonement, rather than the opposition that has occurred between the two doctrines in liberal Protestantism and Anglo-Catholicism.[13]

Athanasius and Nicea

Arius of Alexandria (250–336) did more, perhaps, to make the Incarnation a focal point of the gospel than any other theologian of the first Christian millennium. He made it an issue because of what he did *not* believe. To the orthodox believers, what he did not believe robbed the church of her Savior. When the great council met at Nicea to consider his assertions and the answers of Bishop Alexander, they met to answer the question, "Who can truly save us?"[14]

Though the Council of Nicea in 325 reached a conclusion and affirmed that the Son was "begotten, not made" and that he was "of one substance with the Father," it did not fully settle the matter for the church. The controversy continued to rage for decades after Nicea. Athanasius, who succeeded Alexander as Bishop of Alexandria in 328, championed the cause of the Nicene faith because of the necessity of a true incarnation of God for salvation.[15] Athanasius approached the issue of the relationship between the Father and the Son as a soteriological issue; it was a matter of salvation. If God has not come in Christ and Christ is only a divine creature, then God has remained aloof and Christ has not revealed God at all, much less redeemed humanity.

Even before the outbreak of the Arian heresy, Athanasius had stressed that the "Word of the Father," who had been "from the beginning," was "manifested to us in a human body for our salvation."[16] In his treatise "On the Incarnation of the Word," he laid out the reasons why the church believed in the unity of the Father and the Son while affirming both the true divinity and true humanity of Christ:

> For being Word of the Father, and above all, He alone of natural fitness was both able to recreate everything, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be ambassador for all with the Father.[17]

The early work of Athanasius assumes this relationship between the Father and the Son and argues from that position.

With the new status of Christianity under the emperors Constantine and Constantius, however, the forces of polytheism ceased to exercise the same kind of pressure on Christianity from without. In this more relaxed climate, instead of proclaiming how the Son of God saved, the speculative theologians of the East turned to the philosophical question of the precise manner in which Jesus was the Son of God. When the Arian party grew in strength after Nicea, Athanasius devoted his energies to a defense of the Nicene understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son. If Christ were only a creature, no matter how prominent, he could not have triumphed over sin and death,

> For if He were a creature, he would have been holden by death; but if He was not holden by death, according to the Scriptures, he is not a creature, but the Lord of the creatures, and the subject of this immortal feast.[18]

A number of conservative bishops from Asia who had supported the Nicene formulation at the Council of Nicea later opposed Athanasius at the instigation of the Arian party, who succeeded in confusing the issues with the earlier Sabellian controversy. Eusebius of Caesarea, the church historian, was among those who took an active role in opposing the orthodox position because they failed to recognize that the playing ground had changed and the issues of the age were different.

Post-Nicene Issues

Following the death of Athanasius, the cause of Nicene faith found its ablest defense in the Cappodocian fathers—Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa (younger brother of Basil), and Gregory of Nazianzus—who zealously opposed Arianism and advocated the Nicene viewpoint until the new emperor Theodosius used imperial power and influence to establish firmly the conclusions of the Nicene Council. These were then confirmed by the Council of Constantinople in 381. With the quieting of Arianism, however, new questions about the sense in which Christ was both Son of God and son of David arose. Constantinople also condemned the views of Apollinaris, who taught that the human mind of Jesus had been replaced by the Logos.

Speculation continued to breed controversy into the next century. Nestorius, named patriarch of Constantinople in 428, argued that Christ consisted of two eternally distinguishable natures without an intrinsic union. This view called for intimate cooperation between the human and the divine, but it did not involve the divine taking on humanity. The Council of Ephesus condemned his views in 431.

A final major issue related to the Incarnation during this period came from the views of Eutyches, who held that Christ had only one nature after the Incarnation, the human and the divine being fused into a human-divine being. Leo, the bishop of Rome, led the assault on this position, which compromised a true incarnation. The Council of Chalcedon condemned the views of Eutyches in 451 and issued a creed that affirmed the orthodox view of the issues raised about the Incarnation during the preceding century.

Assessment of the First Five Hundred Years

The Incarnation/Christology debates rocked the church during the 140 years between the Edict of Toleration for Christians issued by Constantine in 311 and the Council of Chalcedon in 451. While the issue of salvation itself lay at the root of the controversies, their occurrence illustrates how the concerns of the church shifted from a concern to proclaim the message of the Son of God/son of David to those outside the church to a concern to reflect for those inside the church on the way in which Jesus Christ was Son of God/son of

David. Disputes of this sort had arisen earlier, prior to toleration by the state, but in a political context free from the earlier cultural hostility and persecution, the church engaged in public theological speculation in a way that its mission had not previously allowed. In the process, the Eastern church showed a growing preference for a speculative/mystical approach to theology that could tolerate ambiguity, while the Western church, following Origen, demonstrated a growing preference for a systematic approach to theology that left no room for uncertainty.

Black Church Theology

Safely imbedded in the creeds since the fifth century, the element of the gospel that focused attention on the human and the divine relationship in Jesus Christ ceased to be a preeminent issue for the church. Other crises and cultural situations called for concentration on other aspects of the gospel. For over a thousand years, the Incarnation remained a foundational assumption of the faith, but one that did not serve as the integrating motif of any particular group or movement—until slavery emerged as an institution in the European colonies of North America.

The Black Church affirmed the created order, but acknowledged creation's fallen state. Slavery posed the ultimate example of the fallen state. The slaves did not spiritualize away the harshness of forced labor or the cruelty of their chains of bondage. While affirming creation, they took the Incarnation as the dominant theme of their theology, for through Christ's coming into the world, God had taken concrete action to do something about the problem. The Black Church did not concern itself with the speculative metaphysics that preoccupied the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers. Instead, it called attention to the activity of God, who would engage the problem.

The Incarnation addresses the issues of oppression, poverty, misery, suffering, hunger, and all the social ills that result from the disruption of the created order by sin. It makes a powerful statement that God cares about the physical conditions of people. The ministry of Jesus in the relief of suffering and oppression demonstrates the character of God and his intentions for people. J. G. Davies has written, "If the West emphasized the cross and the Anti-

ochenes the resurrection, the Alexandrians concentrated upon the incarnation."[19] The Black Church in America has demonstrated an interest in recent years to find its ancient theological heritage. In a sense, it has revived the ancient concern of the African church. William Pannell and others have lamented that none of the great Western theologians have dealt with the implications of the Incarnation that the Black Church has recognized.[20] It has been left to the Black Church to safeguard the gospel from Gnosticizing tendencies that do not take the Incarnation seriously.

Black Church theology is rooted in the slavery experience where through the Incarnation, Christ fulfilled the promise of a prophet like Moses to lead the slaves to freedom. Herbert Klem has argued that in most cultures, theology is sung before it becomes systematized.[21] In the songs of faith, the Black Church continued an ancient African tradition of proclamation through song. Such songs as "Go Down, Moses" found the significance of the Incarnation in the experience of real people whom God had set free in the past. This song repeats the story of the Exodus from Egypt, a concrete act of deliverance by God. Having established a basis for hope and expectation, the song then proclaims Jesus, who came to set people free. In contrast to conceptions of the kingdom of God that focus on the sovereignty of God as Creator or the rule of Christ as the exalted Lord, the Black Church's vision of the kingdom focuses on the coming of the King to reclaim his kingdom and all that rightfully belongs to him.

Because of the Incarnation, the Black Church has experienced God as personal and approachable. At Sinai, the people of Israel were afraid to approach God, so Moses became the intermediary between God and the people. Jesus was the prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15, 18), who now intercedes as the go-between because he shows the face of God. Jesus is approachable by everyone, which he demonstrated by those whom he embraced in his earthly ministry. He can empathize and walk with us because he knows what it is like to walk this earth. God knows human frailty not simply from omniscience, but through the experience of Jesus. Because of the Incarnation, the Black Church has experienced God as one who cares. Thomas Dorsey expressed this perspective on the gospel in his hymn, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand."

Dwight Hopkins has observed of the Black Church in its slavery period:

> Slave theology consistently experienced God dwelling with those in bondage, personal and systematic. The black religious experience prevented any separation between the sacred and the secular, the church and the community. On the contrary, in the "Invisible Institution" black theology grew out of the community and the "church." As a result, *God* ruled with unquestioned omnipotence and realized release from total captivity. And *Jesus* assumed an intimate and kingly relationship with the poor black chattel. Slaves emphasized both the suffering human Jesus as well as Jesus' warrior ability to set the downtrodden free.[22]

This Jesus who has a human face but has the power to set the downtrodden free has continued to form the central integrating motif of the Black church in North America. If the evangelical white churches of North America look to Matthew 28:19–20 as the cardinal statement of what the church is to be, the Black Church looks to Luke 4:18–21.[23] This emphasis was reflected in the ministry of Martin Luther King. His preaching was permeated with the theme of the Christ who came to set people free.

At the end of the twentieth century, the integrating theme of the Black Church may be shifting, just as it did for the medieval European church. The black experience has its roots in the agrarian south, but now finds expression largely in the major urban areas. The Islamic faith has attracted millions of black adherents who had had some affiliation with the Black Church. The challenge of Christianity will be to present Jesus Christ from a perspective that addresses the new realities of the black urban America so that Jesus Christ is seen as good news.[24] A more recent approach calls for a look back to preslavery experiences of black people in Africa, combined with an awareness of black presence in the Scriptures. This approach seeks to bypass the European experience of Christianity and to return to the biblical record to inform the Black Church as it goes into the twenty-first century.

Social Reform Movements

Emerging from the piety of the first Great Awakening, evangelical Christians embarked on a variety of enterprises that took seriously an imitation of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ. These enterprises affirmed the value and worth of people and sought to relieve suffering. Such ministries had an intimate relationship to the evangelistic concern of those involved. The pietistic question, "What would Jesus do?" fueled an enormous exertion of energy and financial expense in an effort to represent Christ as he had carried out his ministry. In this sense, those involved sought to be an incarnation of the incarnate Lord.

George Whitfield preached fervently for conversions in open-air meetings, but he also labored feverishly to raise money for his orphanages. William Wilberforce led the movement that resulted in the abolition of slavery in Great Britain. Evangelicals in Great Britain and in the United States became politically involved to bring about social change. In Great Britain the Reform Bill of 1832 resulted in a major realignment of political power as a huge group of the population received the franchise. In the United States, the evangelicals led the abolition movement and took the lead in fostering primary, secondary, and higher education. With the growth of the urban centers, the Salvation Army and other rescue missions established ministries that approached evangelism from the perspective of rescuing people from physical as well as spiritual danger.[25] During the same period the Roman Catholic churches in the cities embarked on far-reaching social welfare programs specifically designed for immigrant peoples for whom English was a second language.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the attention of socially concerned Christians shifted from demonstrating care for individuals to changing social structures and dealing with issues of justice and economics. This movement grew up in England under the leadership of Bishop Westcott, in Germany under Leonhard Ragaz and Hermann Kutter, and in the United States under Walter Rauschenbusch. The "social gospel" of Rauschenbusch drew strong fire from traditional evangelicals, who saw its emphasis on social structures as opposed to individuals as a subversion of the gospel

message. This separation of perspectives created a dichotomy of ministries that left one group dealing almost exclusively with social issues and the other with spiritual issues.

Neo-orthodoxy moved in a different direction from the American social gospel trend after World War I, but from the perspective of the Incarnation. For people like Barth and Brunner, the Incarnation constitutes the ultimate revelation of God to people. Barth repudiated the natural revelation of Aquinas and rendered Scripture relative in comparison with the significance for salvation of the revelation of Christ.

INCARNATION AS GOOD NEWS

Almost a thousand years ago, Anselm of Canterbury wrote the book *Cur Deus Homo?* (*Why the God-Man?*) to explain the significance of the Incarnation for contemporary medieval society. Two thousand years after Bethlehem, what difference does it make that God entered the world as a man, and what sets off this coming of God from the pictures of God found in other religions?

A Savior

The announcement of the angel to the shepherds of the birth of a Savior sets the gospel of Jesus Christ apart from other world religions (Luke 2:11). These others offer teachers and prophets, but none offers a Savior who rescues people from difficulty from which they cannot save themselves. For people who have reached the end of their rope and find themselves hopelessly entangled in life, it is good news to know that God has taken the initiative to extricate us from our difficulty.

The Compassionate Face

The coming of God into the world reveals the compassionate face of God. While the understanding of God as Creator reveals his holiness and sovereignty, this idea alone can leave one with not only a healthy fear but also an unhealthy dread of God. By coming into the world in Jesus Christ, God revealed a compassionate face that one does not experience when only viewing the awesome beauty, power, and majesty of creation. While the monotheistic religions

often picture a stern and judgmental God, the Eastern religions tend to picture an impersonal, remote, and disinterested divine essence. Through the Incarnation, God came out of hiding and showed the face of caring concern.

Identification

By entering into creation and experiencing it through the true humanity of Jesus Christ, God identified with the human race in a way that makes true sympathy and empathy possible for him. God translated theoretical omniscience into actual experience by learning what it feels like to be human and to deal with mortal life. Like the ancient adage of native American wisdom suggests, God took the ultimate step of understanding by "walking a mile in our moccasins." This identification reflects a specific concern for people.

Alienation and Reconciliation

Existentialists have identified alienation and loneliness as one of the three great dreads of human existence. By our very existence we as human beings are alienated from one another, from nature, and even from our own selves. The plight of human isolation ironically can occur most intensely in a crowd. By bringing together the divine and human in one person, God literally brought reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. In the body of Christ, peace (wholeness) has occurred. Christ offers this same peace with God but also with ourselves and with others. Peace, whether personal or interpersonal, comes as a legacy of God's taking the initiative to make peace. For people who live broken, dysfunctional lives and who cannot maintain relationships, the gospel offers the good news that Jesus Christ brings the pieces back together and makes reconciliation possible.

Acceptance

While the Creator remains veiled in a holiness that mere mortals dare not approach, as the fetishes of tribal religion and the laws of monotheistic religion testify, the God who came in Jesus Christ calls on people to come to him. In his life and ministry, by his words and actions, Jesus called people of all classes and distinctions to come to him. He not only called, but he accepted people, regardless of the

prejudices others might have. It is not uncommon in the African-American tradition to hear people speak of "my Jesus," reflecting their experience of the personal acceptance of the Savior into intimate relationship. Those who orient their faith around other elements of the gospel may regard this affirmation of faith as irreverent, but they have missed the amazing good news that Jesus calls those who come to him his "friends" (John 15:15).

Love

While most religions have holy writings that point to God or give instructions in living, none of these speak to the deep-seated human need to experience love. Love is not an assertion or an affirmation, or even a powerful emotion to be felt. Rather, love appears in the concrete actions of what one does. The Incarnation represents a logical consequence of God's love. The coming of God into the world portrays his love more vividly than any theological concept or any other action by God (except the cross, which could not have occurred without the incarnation), because of what it cost God to come into the world. Love that remains merely spoken but never acted upon does not constitute genuine love. The sophist demands a sign for the existence of God; yet when God appears, the sophist cannot accept it because an appearance of God cannot really be God. For the person who needs to experience self-giving, undemanding, unconditional love, the coming of Christ gives good news that love truly exists and is accessible.

Example

While the Scriptures present the expectations of God, they lack something that only God can offer: an example of how to live the expectation. As a teacher, Jesus not only spoke about God's will but demonstrated what it meant to live out one's life in a right relationship to God. Though he is the sovereign and almighty Ruler of the universe, God chose to enter the world and show it what life is really all about. Rather than being a demanding despot who commands without regard for people, the God who visits us in Christ portrays patient concern of one who teaches by walking alongside those who need to learn. He offers the yoke of two oxen working together. For the person who flees from authority yet leads a chaotic life, the com-

ing of God in Jesus offers good news that in spite of his right to dignity, glory, and honor, God will embrace humility in order to help the one who needs to learn.

Physical Need

While the gospel in its entirety affirms the spiritual character of eternity and the reign of God beyond this mortal life, the coming of God into the world affirms the importance of physical existence. The ministry of Jesus emphasized the importance of caring for the physical needs of people. The Incarnation affirms the value God places on the physical world now, fallen and corrupt though it may be. Other monotheistic religions affirm creation and judgment, but they do not affirm the quality of physical life the way the ministry of Jesus does through healing and compassion. The polytheistic and nontheistic religions of the East deny the value of the physical realm, viewing the perception of physical reality as a curse. Care for the physical needs of a world at odds with itself, however, represents the good news that the kingdom of God is breaking in.

NOTES

1. On this issue, see especially Craig Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus?" *Jesus Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents the Historical Jesus*, ed. Michael J. Wilkins and J. P. Moreland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 17–50.

2. See Rudolph Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, rev. ed., trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1963), 253, 292, 306.

3. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977).

4. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), 138. In his spiritual autobiography, Lewis remarked, "If ever a myth had become fact, had been incarnated, it would be just like this. And nothing else in all literature was just like this. . . . Here and here only in all time the myth must have become fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not 'a religion,' nor 'a

philosophy.' It is the summing up and actuality of them all." See C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1956), 236.

Bernard Ramm has argued that novelists and literary figures like Lewis, Dorothy Sayers, T. S. Elliott, G. K. Chesterton, and Flannery O'Connor stand in a better position to assess the meaning of the Scriptures than technical experts who have lost all sense of wonder. See Bernard L. Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 52.

5. Bultmann, *History of the Synoptic Tradition*, 291–99.

6. See Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 21–24.

7. Ibid., 25.

8. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Preaching the Gospel from the Gospels* (London: Epworth, 1965), 60–67.

9. Ibid., 62. "Throughout the Gospels, where the polemic atmosphere is not present, the miracles are narrated in the consciousness that they reveal the presence of the victorious Kingdom of God, quenching the powers of evil and coming to the aid of needy men."

10. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Joseph P. Smith (Westminster, Md.: Newman, 1952), 23–24.

11. Ibid., 68–74.

12. Ibid., 68.

13. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 18.

14. Bernard L. Ramm, *An Evangelical Christology: Ecumenic and Historic* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 32.

15. Williston Walker sums up the motives of Athanasius in terms of his concern for salvation: "To him, the question at issue was one of salvation, and that he made men feel it to be so was the main source of his power." See *A History of the Christian Church*, 3d ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 110. Archibald Robertson took up this same theme in his edition of the writings of Athanasius: "It was not as a theologian, but as a believing soul in need of a Saviour, that Athanasius approached the mystery of Christ." See A. Robertson, ed., *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, 2d series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987; reprint of Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark,), xiv.

16. Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word" (ibid., 36).

17. Ibid., 40.

18. Athanasius reiterated the importance of the Incarnation for salvation in his Easter letter of 339 ("Letter XI," ibid., 537).

19. J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church: A History of Its First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 260.

20. William Pannell, *Evangelism From the Bottom Up* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 35–37.

21. Herbert V. Klem, *Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights From African Oral Art* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1982). While Klem's study focuses on Africa, it suggests that the Black Church in America has a rich theological heritage based on an oral tradition that remains vibrant rather than on a theological heritage, based on a written tradition, that tends to be kept only by the professionals.

22. Dwight N. Hopkins, "Slave Theology in the 'Invisible Institution,'" in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. H. Cummings (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 2.

23. I am indebted to Archie Le Mone, executive director of the Home Mission Board for the Progressive National Baptist Convention, for this insight.

24. A number of young, university-trained black theologians began to emerge in the 1960s, who combined the older Black Church heritage with some of the emphases of liberation theology. See Jones H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2 vols., 2d ed. rev. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993).

25. See Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1976), and Norris Magnuson, *Salvation in the Slums: Evangelical Social Work, 1865–1920* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1977).