

Incarnation: You either have a grasp on it, or the only thing you can think of is carne asada. Chances are your ideals of a tasty Tex-Mex inspired dish are probably closer than what you think, or know, about the incarnation. Simply put, the term “incarnation,” means, “in flesh,”¹ or from a Latin derivative, *incaro*, or “in meat.” In terms theological, and Christian in nature, the incarnation of Jesus is the paramount event of God becoming both divine *and* man, human flesh. Or, as Bruxy Cavey cleverly put it, “instead of chili con carne, chili with meat, Jesus is God con carne, God with meat.”

This concept, incredibly important to us as followers of Jesus, is one of the most misunderstood and misconstrued concepts for believers. If you’re already thinking that this is a word or concept that doesn’t have value or meaning to you then think again. The misunderstanding of the Incarnation helped give birth to three of the most famous heresies the church has ever had to combat: Gnosticism, or the belief that Jesus was only a man; Arianism, or that Jesus was created; and Nestorianism, or that the person of Jesus, and His identity as the Son of God, are somehow separate.

Under the correct perception of the Incarnation of Jesus, we should be able to see that Jesus is **both** human *and* divine (also called hypostatic union), and that the incarnation is as Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained, that Jesus is, “the reality of God entered into the reality of this world.”

The most popular Bible verse used to talk about the incarnation of Jesus is John 1:14, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (ESV) Or, as Eugene Peterson cleverly rephrased it, “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish.” (MSG)

We should begin with John 1:14 and discuss the idea of the “Word,” or the *logos*, which means, “word.” John refers to the “Word” as Jesus. The beginning of John’s Gospel and the beginning of 1 John use the “Word” to show us how Jesus can be God and yet be an expression of God in the world. God’s “Word” took on human form and became a real person. Logos is also the title of Christ in the vision of his divine glory (Rv 19:13).²

Too much over your head? Me too...

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1025.

² Ibid., 1346.

Instead, let's explain "Word" in this way:

If I told you about little boys, and had you not known any, you would only be able to think of all of the knowledge that you already know about little boys, but not fully understand what a boy is actually like. But, if you knew my son, you would know his personality, his certain quirks, his affection and response to dogs, and how he runs like a wounded T-Rex. You would be given an example of what a boy is, and it would help you make a clear distinction to what a boy is not. The use of "Word" is a way that God uses to describe Himself. It is difficult to know everything there is to know about God, especially as God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and in every place, but God took all of Himself, bottled it up, and shipped it out into the world in the person of Jesus. Hebrews 1:3 says that Jesus is the "imprint of God's nature," with the specific idea being that of coin making. If you worked for the Federal Reserve and made coins you'd see that molten hot metal is poured into a form or mold, and the coins would be produced and would bear the same image as its' parent: the form. Jesus is God, in His fullest, personified. So God has given Himself, in flesh, in the person of Jesus, to show us what God is actually like. Thus we have a clear picture, through Jesus, of what God is like, and a clear distinction of saying what God is not like. Hint: anything that is NOT Jesus would not be God.

The incarnation of Jesus is about God coming to dwell with His people. Before Christ, God was often viewed as a distant Creator, a deity to be appeased, but through the incarnation we find the highly relational values of the divine. Paul's letter to the church at Philippi explains this best...

Philippians 2:6-11 says, "who (Jesus), though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (ESV) The few verses before this reference how God looks to the best interests of others, an encouragement for us to do likewise.

Let's do a quick commentary on several scriptures in Philippians 2...

V. 6 - "The point of verse 6 is that Jesus was indeed already equal with God; somehow Paul is saying that Jesus already existed even before he became a human being (verse 7). But the decision to become human, and to go all the way along the road of obedience, obedience to the divine plan of salvation, yes, all the way to the cross - this decision was not a decision to stop being divine. It was a decision about what it really meant to be divine."³

³ NT Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 102.

V. 7 - The idea of “empty,” or *kenoo*, is not that God had to stop being God in order to be human. God cannot stop being God, and so for God, “to become a man was humbling enough, but he was willing to go even further. Christ could have come to earth in his true position as King of the universe. Instead, he took the role of a servant. The Creator chose to serve his creatures. Jesus did not come into existence as a baby in Bethlehem. As God, He always existed. He did take on human nature as Jesus of Nazareth **being made in human likeness** but remained sinless (Heb. 4:15). Christ did not have a halo as paintings sometimes portray him. He entered this earthly life looking like an ordinary man. Had you passed him on a street, he probably would not have caught your attention.”⁴ God was FULLY God, and FULLY human.

Bruxy Cavey helps us understand these two verses, in conjunction with the incarnation, “I don’t only create you, now I want to become you, to make my message completely clear to you.”

Any amount of explanation, or “theologizing,” cannot do justice to something that is seemingly paradox. Paradox is when two unlikely things can be true at the exact same time. The very nature of Christ is paradoxical: **man AND God**. There are a number of paradoxes in scripture, another central paradox being the Kingdom of God: fully here, but not complete. The incarnation is a widely studied subject with the enticement of the subject being the mysterious nature of the incarnation itself.

Paradox and mystery aside, the incarnation is an essential piece of God’s redemptive story. As previously mentioned, Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that in Jesus, “the reality of God entered into the reality of this world.” But what does that even mean? Exactly what it says.

The world, having been a messy, messy place was in dire need of the arrival of God. The very reality of God, summed up in Jesus, steps into the muck and mire of humanity, or as John 1:14 famously says, “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,” or simply this, “everything Jesus did,” and was, “shows us the full meaning of that Word.”⁵ If we want to see what God is like, what God does, how God feels, or how God responds then we look to Jesus.

Now... What does this mean?

Pastor, author, and theologian, Greg Boyd, helps clarify this question, “Since we’ve seen that the New Testament presents Jesus as the definitive revelation of God, we must ask: What was the

⁴ Max Anders, *Galatians-Colossians*, vol. 8, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 225–226.

⁵ <http://fossore.wpengine.com/day-19-word-made-flesh/>

divine quality that Jesus definitively revealed? When Jesus said, 'Who sees me sees the father,' (Jn 14:9) what exactly was it about the Father that Jesus was referring to?"⁶

Greg Boyd says that it's the nature of God that is revealed. I agree. The very nature of God is summarized in the statement, "God is love." (1 Jn 4:8) and we know what love looks like (1 Jn 3:16). The very nature of Jesus is expressed in His sacrificial death at the Cross, but before the Cross the nature of God, through Jesus, is exhibited in His actions.

To say that, "the Word became flesh," is to say that Christ invaded, and is invading, the culture. Christ invaded the life of fishermen and called them onto a journey. Christ invaded the booth of Levi and turned his life upside down. Christ invaded the table of Zacchaeus and whatever went on that night changed Zacchaeus' life forever. Christ invaded a dip into the well and caused a ruckus in the town that day. Christ invaded the heart of the demoniac, resulting in a bash against the local economy. The very nature of the incarnation interrupts us wherever we are because as Greg Ogden says, "Jesus continues His incarnation by dwelling in His people." The grocery store? He's there. The daily cubicle grind? He's there. In mansions of the world's elite? There, too! Wherever Jesus shows up, He calls us to a radical followership that is marked by our lives never being the same. Let me illustrate how...

To the perpetually impoverished Jesus gives us the hope that we don't have to stay that way forever, which is the faith that accelerates the imaginations of those in Christ Jesus. To the ultra wealthy who make up the 1%, Jesus confronts us at our pursuits for purpose and legacy and translates the idea of material blessings for ourselves to them blessing others.

The incarnation of Jesus is an ongoing revelation, as the Spirit resides in believers, forming us to the likeness of Christ.

⁶ <http://reknew.org/2014/02/what-kind-of-god-did-jesus-reveal/#sthash.P8xAEJ8K.dpuf>