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THE INCARNATION

THE INCARNATION has been the central doctrine of Christianity for the past fifty years or more, during which period it has almost completely displaced the doctrine of Atonement from its position at the heart of the Christian Gospel. This has led to certain weaknesses in the exposition of Christianity which will be remedied only by restoring the Atonement to its rightful place of centrality. That is not now our concern, however, but rather the nature of the Incarnation, as that great fact has been popularly interpreted during our own period.

One of the main reasons for the overwhelming emphasis placed upon the Incarnation was the interest in Man aroused by the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century and in particular by the theory of evolution. The spotlight of history was narrowed into the microscope held by science over the New World which was—Man. Not unnaturally, the result of this interest was felt in the religious sphere—not so much in the heated controversies between the “Fundamentalists” and the “Progressives” as to the divine right of scientists to follow the truth, but on a far deeper level of critical thinking. Here, in the depths of Christian thought, below the stormy surface of the intellectual seas, a change in the attitude to Christ was taking place. The emphasis upon man and his nature awakened a corresponding interest in the nature of Christ—and from the same standpoint as that from which man was examined. Man had discovered a new method of self-examination, and as with all new tools, he believed that this one was infallible. It could show him what was in man, and so lead to a new era of self-perfection. That being so, it could hardly be long before the thought should occur that it would be no sacrilege to examine the One who alone had shown what man could become. In Him men could see not only the pinnacle of man’s greatness, but, with the help of the new method, might also discover the means by which that perfect Manhood could be attained by others.

It was by no means strange that the theory of Evolution should lead to the idea of Christ as the Ideal Man—Man as he would be at the peak of his development. So, in this subtle way, the doctrine of Incarnation was ensnared by this new

theory. We can see to-day how many Christians came to believe that it was the purpose of Christ's life on earth to show what it was possible for man to become when he would be full-grown, and would have rid himself of all his imperfections, and rightly ordered his life accordingly.

The examination of Christ's earthly life gradually went to such a point that it may be said without exaggeration that the carnal aspect began to obscure the Incarnation. The importance of the historic Christian doctrine came to consist not in the fact that He was the Word of God, and God's Only Son, but that He was perfect Man, the pattern of goodness and holiness, meekness, righteousness and love. Indeed, we do not unjustly depict the situation by saying that many believe, even to-day, that Christ's excellence in these virtues is so evident that there is little need to mention His divinity, or to concern themselves with miracles and transfiguration and literal resurrection in order to substantiate His uniqueness.

That there is some truth in what lies behind this standpoint we must admit. But that is certainly not the Incarnation we find in the pages of the New Testament. There, the primary fact is that Christ has come from God. It is that fact above all, above even the intrinsic self-evident goodness of Christ's life, that gives authority and value to all that Christ does and says. The Incarnation is not a puzzle, as though God had set out to tease men's intellects and have them at last guess that God exists, and that He is like Jesus of Nazareth. God came amongst men in His Son Jesus Christ because He *wanted* men to know Him and understand Him, to see Him in His activities, to have the pleasure of His fellowship and the certainty of His greatness and glory. Christ reveals God, and makes clear the claims of His will. The New Testament cannot be understood, nor the Gospel rightly interpreted, except from the standpoint that Christ is the Incarnation of God, and not merely an example of the perfect Man.

The four Gospels are not a part of the literature of man's search for God; they are the story of God's sojourn amongst men in His Son.

It follows from this that we must stress this point: everything that Christ did and said, as well as what He was in Himself—down to the smallest details—was intended by Christ to throw light on the nature, character and will of God. Christ's

purpose was to reveal God in all those aspects of Him which are of importance to man, because God *wants* man to understand Him fully, as a worshipper and friend and child ought to understand God, the loving Father.

Therefore every part of Christ's ministry is filled with divine significance. Nothing is without meaning, but all is part of the light which God shines upon Himself through Christ. The Gospels are full of this divine light. Let us consider the minuteness of this revelation.

The words of Jesus do not raise much cause for dispute from this angle. All parties within the Church, from Unitarians to Roman Catholics, agree that Christ's words proclaim truths possessing divine content. His parables, and Beatitudes, His preaching and His answers to questioners, all provide guidance which cannot be equalled regarding the nature of God and the duty of man.

Every Christian sect also claims that Christ performed great works of healing and liberation upon many unfortunate men and women, and admits that He possessed greater power than anyone else, because He was without sin, and so had greater authority than men guilty of sin. In short, fairly general assent is given to the belief that Christ revealed God's nature in such words and actions. When Christ healed the sick, He revealed God as Healer; when Christ pitied, He revealed God as merciful; when He pronounced forgiveness, Christ made plain what is true also of God.

But observe that all these admissions do not rise in any degree above what is *humanly possible*. All that we have noted so far, as being accomplished by Christ, might also be within the power of another perfect, sinless man, should such a one exist in the future. And when we come to the question of miracles, the recorded supernatural acts of Christ, we find that they are a prohibitive stumbling-block. Miracles such as Christ Walking on the Sea, Feeding the Multitude, and Raising the Dead, are unacceptable, not because they can be disproved (indeed, few, if any of them can be, even after several generations of Higher and Lower Criticism), but because they are inconsistent with a particular theory of Incarnation which is held by many. That theory maintains that there is nothing in Christ's nature which is not also part of the perfect man. The revelation in Christ is a revelation of the natural and human,

in its perfect state—and not a revelation of the Divine. It follows from this that everything in the Gospel story of Christ which appears to pass the limit of rational possibility, i.e. what is deemed possible to the Ideal Man, must be discarded as historically untrue. It is for this reason that so many people have denied to Christ attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence, not on grounds of evidence but as the result of belief in a particular theory.

What is the New Testament evidence on this point?

“For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.”
“For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell.”
Not the fullness of man, but the fullness of God. Similar statements could be quoted from almost every writer in the New Testament in support of these comprehensive examples, which are the expressions of the judgment of the Early Church—the Church which knew Christ in the flesh.

But it is the Gospels which give us the full meaning of the nature of the Incarnation. Do we find there a description of the perfect man—the Ideal Man? Is Christ shown there as merely a balanced, reasonable being, full of human virtues? That is there, certainly, but how much more? What of the inexplicable strangeness which startled everyone? What of the irresistible authority He displayed? The Gospels are full of people’s amazement and astonishment in His presence. Such phrases as “What is this . . . ?” “Who is this . . . ?” occur too often to need reference. They denote the effect which Christ produced on His hearers—the effect of His authority in word and deed. The evidence of the Gospels is that this authority was the quality most characteristic of Him. Christ’s authority was a divine authority, and part of His mission on earth was to reveal the power of that authority. True, He revealed God as love, righteousness, and gentleness. But the power behind His revelation of these is His *authority*. Everything He said and did stands upon the absoluteness of His authority. He did not reveal detached truths—He revealed truths which His authority stamped as eternal and absolute. And the method of His authority is seen in His substitution of the *act* for the word: “And the Word was made flesh.” The word may say that God forgives. More than one prophet spoke that word—but the overburdened soul demands a fact to prove its truth, the word is not enough.

Christ came to the sinner and spoke, "Son, thy sins are forgiven thee". And before he could think or doubt, that sinner was standing on his feet, healed and free. It was not the word that set him free, but the imperative authority behind it, which made anything but obedience impossible. "But that ye may know that the Son of Man hath power on earth to forgive sins": that is not a human prerogative, but God's own authority in action. That is the incarnation of forgiveness—a fact, not a principle.

What, then, it may be asked, is the purpose of the more striking examples of Christ's authority—the outstanding miracles?

Christ wished to reveal certain truths about God which neither words, nor any of the ordinary means of action could possibly express. So He had to create new channels of expression, where existing ones were inadequate. These new channels were the so-called "supernatural" miracles which have proved such a hindrance to the faith of many. These miracles are the incarnation of truths which either could not be, or would only inadequately be, revealed through the existing media. The "fullness of the Godhead" could not be conveyed to men merely by means of words, therefore it must be done through acts—*new* acts. And these new acts portray truths which are beyond the power of man even at his hypothetical perfect state.

Let us take two or three examples.

What of the truth that God is Creator, and Lord of Creation? This surely is the tremendous truth which Christ reveals in the incident of the quelling of the Wind and the Sea—when the storm obeyed Him. There Christ acts as God, in His lordship over one part of His creation—and Christ acts this before the eyes of men. It is an *act* proving the truth that God is Creator, and Ruler of the natural elements. The story of Christ walking on the sea is similar in meaning. It shows, in the presence of men, the indisputable authority of God over all material things—the absolute authority which extends to the utmost limits of the Universe.

It may be objected that such acts are unnecessary. Not so, for they reveal God in a manner which none could doubt, and facts about God which could be revealed in no other way. But of what *use* are such works? They give certainty of God's Lordship in His universe. But apart from that, they reveal

God Himself, and show what He is like, and it is God's wish that men should know Him and know Him well, as one friend knows another, not only in those qualities which may be *useful* or necessary in their relationship. We know many things about our friends which have no utilitarian value—but they disclose something of their nature—and we feel closer to them because of what we know. So all truth about God brings the believer into greater intimacy with Him.

Another example is the Raising of the Dead. There are definite instances of this: the daughter of Jairus, the widow of Nain's son, and Lazarus. Christ, in doing these great works, wished to show men some tremendous truth. Surely it was that He wished to set the seal of historical certainty upon the hope that there was One who was able to give life, and make the dead live again. In these incidents Christ gives visible and credible proof of God's power to overcome death. The question of immortality surely took on a lighter and more hopeful aspect for all those who saw Christ actually cancel the authority and power of death. God is seen as the Lord of time and eternity, announcing in facts, "I am the resurrection and the Life". And if we were to seek further significance in the restoration of Lazarus to earthly life, we may add that he was Jesus' friend—and are not the privileges of those who love God even greater still? Could God leave His loved ones in the grip of death? Love must bestow or create Life—that is its nature; and God is Love. God, surely, will not leave those He loves, and who love Him, in the grave—He will raise them up into life with Him, beyond the gates of death. The friendship of Christ and Lazarus, in fact, *cannot* be destroyed or broken by death. Rather, every hindrance is overcome, that they may come together again.

As a final example let us take the miracle of the Feeding of the Multitude. The story of the feeding of the five thousand, for instance, is full of suggestions arising directly out of the context. Christ sees the need of the people, and reveals that He has more than enough to satisfy them, since they have come to Him. This happens even when the supply seems at first sight inadequate. With Christ in charge of the situation, everything is changed. The amazing act takes us back to the Divine Giver and Supporter of life. He will provide, for He knows His work. When He does the sharing, man's little is

turned into sufficiency. With trust in Him, life becomes more orderly—and we see the multitude sitting down quietly—and all are provided for. “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

Whatever the interpretation we put on the details, this miracle shows us God, the Creator of the world and all its produce, at work as it were filling the tables with sufficient for men’s needs. Men see Him, for once, actually at work creating and providing, through the blessed hands of Christ His Son—and they know Him there as He is, the Almighty God, Lord of Heaven and earth.

Christ is not a partial incarnation, but—“He who hath seen me hath seen the Father”. Behind all His acts, God is manifest: His greatness, His love, His omnipotence, His mercy. The full glory of God, for the sake of man.

Is this the Incarnation that we see? Or are we in danger of undoing the Incarnation, and setting a human Christ in its place? Christ was completely human, and none were more aware of that than those who were His friends on earth. But when He exercised His authority they were filled with awe. Even His enemies were forced to explain Him in terms of the supernatural: “He hath Beelzebub, and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils.” All merely human explanations were inadequate. Others said, as the light began to dawn upon them—“God hath visited His people”. He revealed and exercised authority, before men’s eyes, over sickness, evil spirits, over death, the elements of nature, and over sin. Divinity flashed out in His authoritative word. He was man, until He commanded: He commanded with the authority of God, and all things obeyed Him.

We cannot solve the mystery of the “two natures”. But when we look on Christ we see God, for in Him dwells the fullness of the Godhead.

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