

What is the Incarnation?



Basics of
the Faith

S E R I E S

William B. Evans

What Is the Incarnation?

Basics of the Faith

- | | |
|--|--|
| <i>Am I Called?</i> | <i>What Is Perseverance of the Saints?</i> |
| <i>How Do We Glorify God?</i> | <i>What Is Providence?</i> |
| <i>How Our Children Come to Faith</i> | <i>What Is Regeneration?</i> |
| <i>Is Jesus in the Old Testament?</i> | <i>What Is Spiritual Warfare?</i> |
| <i>What Are Election and Predestination?</i> | <i>What Is the Atonement?</i> |
| <i>What Are Spiritual Gifts?</i> | <i>What Is the Bible?</i> |
| <i>What Happens after Death?</i> | <i>What Is the Christian Worldview?</i> |
| <i>What Is a Reformed Church?</i> | <i>What Is the Doctrine of Adoption?</i> |
| <i>What Is a True Calvinist?</i> | <i>What Is the Incarnation?</i> |
| <i>What Is Biblical Preaching?</i> | <i>What Is the Lord's Supper?</i> |
| <i>What Is Church Government?</i> | <i>What Is the Trinity?</i> |
| <i>What Is Discipleship?</i> | <i>What Is True Conversion?</i> |
| <i>What Is Evangelism?</i> | <i>What Is Vocation?</i> |
| <i>What Is Faith?</i> | <i>What Is Worship Music?</i> |
| <i>What Is Grace?</i> | <i>Why Believe in God?</i> |
| <i>What Is Hell?</i> | <i>Why Do We Baptize Infants?</i> |
| <i>What Is Justification by Faith Alone?</i> | <i>Why Do We Have Creeds?</i> |
| <i>What Is Man?</i> | <i>Why Do We Pray?</i> |
| <i>What Is Mercy Ministry?</i> | <i>Why God Gave Us a Book</i> |

Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

What Is the Incarnation?

William B. Evans



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2013 by William B. Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from *ESV Bible*® (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (RSV) are from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version*, ©1946, 1952, 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-829-1 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-59638-830-7 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-831-4 (Mobi)

Page design by Tobias Design

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Evans, William B.

What is the Incarnation? / William B. Evans.

pages cm. -- (Basics of the faith)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-829-1 (pbk.)

1. Jesus Christ--Person and offices. 2. Incarnation. I. Title.

BT203.E93 2013

232'.1--dc23

2013023451



■ **This booklet** is an introduction to Christology (the doctrine of the person of Christ)—a topic that lies at the center of Christian faith. As we will soon see, there is much to think about here, but at the outset a crucial point needs to be made. Although there are issues of Christology that continue to perplex and fascinate theologians, the doctrine of the incarnation is first and foremost a matter of doxology rather than an intellectual puzzle. It is something that should cause us to marvel at the matchless grace of God and to respond to that grace with worship and praise. After all, the second person of the Trinity has come to us in human form to save helpless sinners, to accomplish salvation for us, to unite us with himself, and so to raise us up into fellowship and communion with God. Even as our faith seeks understanding on this issue, may we be driven to worship and adore the God who has created us for himself, who has revealed himself to us in his written and incarnate Word, and who has by the work of that incarnate Word redeemed a people for himself.¹

Anyone who desires to be a Christian must answer two vital questions. The first is this: who is Jesus Christ? The second follows quickly upon the first: what has Christ done for me so that I may be saved? As we shall see, our explorations here will focus on the first question, but we must touch on the second as well.

According to the great confessional tradition of the church, in dependence upon Scripture we affirm that Christ is both truly God

(*vere deus*) and truly human (*vere homo*) and that these two natures nevertheless comprise one divine-human person. Echoing the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), the Westminster Confession of Faith declares “that two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.”²² Admittedly, this is the careful language of technical theology, but here the Westminster divines express truth that is of momentous, indeed essential, practical importance. Thus we must be careful not to dismiss these somewhat technical discussions of the person of Christ as irrelevant to the life and health of the church, or as of little consequence for our Christian lives.

SOME PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

As we suggested above, we cannot ultimately separate the doctrine of Christ’s person from the doctrine of his work. They go together, because Jesus was perfectly fitted for the work he came to do. This strong connection of person and work is evident in the two most influential theological arguments for the full deity of Christ from the early and medieval church periods. The first is by Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373), that stalwart hero of the faith who did more to defeat the Arian heresy (which denied the deity of Christ) than any other. He wrote in his treatise “On the Incarnation”:

The reason of his bodily appearing; that it was in the power of none other to turn the corruptible to incorruption, except the Saviour himself, that had at the beginning also made all things out of naught; and that none other could create anew the likeness of God’s image for men, save the image of the Father; that none other could render the mortal immortal, save our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the very life; and that

none other could teach men of the Father, and destroy the worship of idols, save the Word, that orders all things and is alone the true only begotten Son of the Father.³

Here the great bishop of Alexandria argues that sin has decisively separated humanity from God who is the source of life and immortality, that only God himself can fix the situation, and that Christ therefore must be fully God. Note also that Athanasius is pointing us to a particular aspect of Christ's saving work—his transforming work *in us*.

The second great argument regarding the person of Christ was presented by that remarkable medieval theologian Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109). In his treatise entitled *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why the God-Man*), the great archbishop of Canterbury notes that human sin has resulted in alienation because God's infinite honor has been offended and a proper satisfaction must be offered. Furthermore, only God can offer such infinite satisfaction and only man should offer satisfaction, and so the one offering such satisfaction must be the God-man. Anselm's formulation here is worth quoting in full:

For God will not do it, because he does not owe it, and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, for the God-Man to do this, the person who is to make this satisfaction must be both perfect God and perfect man, because none but true God can make it, and none but true man owes it. Thus, while it is necessary to find a God-Man in whom the integrity of both natures is preserved, it is no less necessary for these two complete natures to meet in one person—just as body and rational soul meet in one man—for otherwise the same person could not be perfect God and perfect man.⁴

Here we see that Anselm is focusing particularly on the question of what Christ does *for us*. To rephrase the matter in

more familiar terms, we recognize that God is just and that human sin must be punished. After all, as the apostle Paul teaches, “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). The only way for sinners to be redeemed from this penalty of eternal death is for a perfect sacrifice to be offered, and Jesus as the God-man is this perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice for sin on our behalf as he took upon himself the penalty that we deserve. Thus Christians have rightly sensed that Jesus Christ must be exactly who the Bible says he is—God and man in a single person—in order that he might both reconcile us to God and transform us into the people God wants us to be.

This doctrine of the person of Christ is also inevitably connected with other crucial doctrines of the faith. Because Christ is fully God and fully human, it is closely related to what theologians call “theology proper” (the doctrine of God) and to theological anthropology (the doctrine of humanity). History demonstrates that it is particularly connected to our understanding of humanity in its sinful and fallen condition. Some have argued that the human condition is not grave, and that all we need is a bit of education and encouragement to do what is right. In other words, a modest savior will do. Such people often deny that Christ is God and view him as little more than a human teacher and example of moral truth.⁵ On the other hand, if the human condition in sin is not only grave but completely beyond our capacity to rectify it, if we are truly dead in trespasses and sins, then we need a grand and mighty Savior, one who is no less than God himself. In addition, the doctrine of the incarnation is related to our doctrine of salvation, for all of salvation comes to us through our spiritual union with Christ (see Eph. 1:3–14), and he is the mediator between God and human beings (1 Tim. 2:5). Finally, it is related to ecclesiology, or the doctrine of the church, for the church is the body of Christ (see Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Cor. 12:12–31). Thus we have ample reason and incentive to get this doctrine of the person of Christ right.

“Concisely and accessibly, Dr. Evans demonstrates . . . how crucial [the incarnation] is and how only the incarnate Son of God could save us.”

■ **Robert Letham**, Author, *Union with Christ*

“Evans introduces us to both the teaching of Scripture and the loving reflections of some of the best minds of the Christian centuries. . . . Will stimulate even greater love for and faith in the Lord Jesus.”

■ **Sinclair Ferguson**, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church

Want to make sense of the New Testament? Start with the incarnation—a truth that goes far beyond Christmas.

The miracle of Jesus’ incarnation touches on deep truths, speaking to the very nature of God and humanity. Evans shows how the Bible consistently supports the incarnation as actual fact. He also describes the early church’s efforts to express this great mystery and explores some key questions about the incarnation and its practical implications for our daily lives.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

William B. Evans is Younts Professor of Bible and Religion at Erskine College in Due West, South Carolina.

www.prpbooks.com

COVER DESIGN BY TOBIAS' OUTERWEAR FOR BOOKS
tobiasdesign.com

COVER PHOTO © REAL CG / FOTOLIA.COM

PR

P U B L I S H I N G

THEOLOGY/SON

ISBN: 978-1-59638-829-1

EAN

9 781596 388291 50499