

The Mystery of the Incarnation: “Great is the Mystery of Godliness”

PAUL HELM

Paul Helm was Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s College in London, England. Previously he served for many years in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of a number of books, including *Faith, Form, and Fashion: Classical Reformed Theology and its Postmodern Critics* (Cascade, 2014); *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford, 2004); *Belief Policies* (Cambridge, 1994); and *Eternal God* (Oxford, 1988; 2nd ed., 2010).

ORIENTATION

The term “incomprehensible” has changed in emphasis over the years. It has strengthened in meaning and become rougher. It now means gibberish or nonsense, and usually refers to bits of verbal communication that are impossible for various reasons to make sense of. It’s a black or white term, a term of rebuke, a put down. But in Christian theology generally the term is not used of locutions, but of states of affairs, of realities. A state of affairs that can be incomprehensible to a degree, a matter of more or less so. We can grow in understanding, and what was totally incomprehensible can become less so, through being taught, or by our own reflection, or by gaining more information. Such thinking, the presence of incomprehensibilities and their toleration, is shunned by the rationalist temper, for whom what is not readily understood through the senses and by the reason cannot be real, or warrant serious attention. And there is something of that rationalist temper in all of us. We want to know, and suspect the claim that some matter cannot be fully understood as being evidence of some failure—or conspiracy. Ours is

a culture that tells itself that it is only satisfied with “transparency.”

“Mystery” is a positive New Testament word, almost exclusively Pauline but anticipated by Jesus’ references to the “mysteries of the kingdom” which were being made known to his disciples even as Jesus taught them. There is about such mysteries both disclosure and reserve. Paul uses the word to refer to happenings, events, and so to states of affairs, or combinations of these features. Sometimes what is or was mysterious has a dispensational ring to it. What is now revealed was previously a “mystery,” something that previously the angels “longed to look” and couldn’t because they were too early. What, after the “making known” still remains mysterious, held back, may and will be made known in the future.

At other times states of affairs that Paul calls a “mystery” are so because of their inherent strangeness. So it is with the Incarnation. This is a “mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints” (Col 1:26). In fact the Incarnation is both, something revealed, and yet remaining a mystery. Paul prays that the Colossian church may “reach all the riches of full understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). The nature and activities of God are also for Paul inherently inaccessible and must count as mysteries, matters which are “past finding out.” Whether there is a difference between mysteries which will forever remain unfathomable, and those which eventually will be made plain, will not concern us here. At one point in discussing the mysteries regarding person of Christ, the Puritan John Owen remarks, rather laconically, “What we shall farther comprehend of them in the other world, God only knows.”¹ Implied in these words is the distinction between the comprehension of some matter, and its “apprehension” a partial though real understanding of it.

In this article I wish to look at those elements of the Incarnation that are not fully comprehensible, but “apprehended.” That is, we have some understanding, drawn from our understanding of human affairs, used analogically, to characterize the ways in which God behaves according to Scripture. And then there are those elements of the doctrine that are well-nigh incomprehensible. But I shall finally argue that this is no reason to suspend our judgment regarding the reality of and the fundamental place of the Incarnation in our faith, much less to modify it or reject it.

There are two fundamental mysteries in the Christian faith, the Trinity and

the Incarnation. The mystery of the Trinity has to do with how the one God has three persons each of whom are distinct yet fully divine. "It seems to me, that nothing can be more admirable than the words of Gregory Nazianzen: "I cannot think of the unity without being irradiated by the Trinity; I cannot distinguish between the Trinity without being carried up to the unity."² Here Calvin endorses a kind of mental oscillation in order that we may remain steady in our appreciation of both the one-ness and the three-ness of God. We may regard this remark as identifying part of the discipline that Christians need to develop in their thinking about God and his ways.

The second mystery has to do with the Incarnation of one of these persons, the Logos of God, the second person of the three. This is what is chiefly to concern us in this piece. This involves the Logos, who is God, taking on human nature, both body and spirit, and thus becoming our mediator. His divine nature is eternal and immutable, while his human nature experiences growth and maturation.

A further preliminary has to do with systematic theological endeavor. What is the theologians' task? Theology is not a Christian technology. It is not the theologian's place to devise explanations of what is revealed, including its mysteries, and so help us to master God's revelation. The theologian is not like a detective or a consultant engineer. Rather, theologians help us to think about and understand our faith, including its mysteries, in a way that does not depart from the revelation which God has given us in Scripture and through his Son. If the stress of Scripture on the three-ness of God, his three-personhood, leads us to talk as if there are three gods, then this is a mistake, because it flies in the face of Scripture, with its repeated affirmation that the Lord our God is one Lord. If the recognition of the oneness of God leads us in the direction of deism, and the Mediator is regarded as merely a creature, though perhaps the highest of creatures, then we are to be corrected by the biblical data respecting the three-ness of God, and so on. So theology should foster the discipline of faithful thinking and speaking and, as with any discipline, the ways of thinking necessary for it have to be acquired.

THREE THINGS THAT WE PARTLY UNDERSTAND REGARDING THE INCARNATION

In saying that there are three things that we partly understand about the Incarnation I am not saying these things are all there are to our partial

understanding of this central mystery of our faith. But they are three central things, most of them discussed in the literature about the Incarnation. These things also remind us about important biblical emphases as to the shape of the Incarnation, its contours. I discuss them in no particular order, though you may think that they have an order.

(1) The accessing relationship. In the coming together of the Godhead and human nature in the person of the Logos, a one-sided accessing relationship is involved. The Incarnation was not the union of God with an abstract principle or concept, but of union with a particular instance of a human nature, one that from the earliest moment of its conception was in union with the Logos. There was no time such that in that instant the fetus in Mary's womb had a separate, nor even a separable existence as a mere human person. The Son did not become incarnate by adopting an already-existing human fetus or newly-born person. Further, it is a feature of this union that the eternal Son has access to the human mind of this instance of human nature, which in Incarnation became an aspect of the Person of the Son. The Incarnation was not the union of two separate things, the divine Logos and a fetus of a Jewish boy, but a divine Person taking on the powers and qualities of a human being, body and mind, into his own Person, separate still (according to Chalcedon³) but as joined as it is possible for such separate entities to be.

The human powers of the Mediator included human consciousness. We know from data in the New Testament that the human consciousness in the union was accessed by the divine person, but that the human consciousness did not in a parallel way have access to the contents of the divine mind, unless that divine mind revealed it in the regular way. And it seems inconceivable that the human consciousness could have direct access to the divine mind as God himself has access to it. The human personality was in no way divinized, even though it was (and is) in union of the divine. Moreover, the union did not entail a transfer of the human properties from the human nature to the divine person. When God became man, he did so not by losing divine properties, or by having them augmented in some way, but by gaining a human nature. Jesus Christ grew, his qualities developed in a normal human way; he asked questions, and learned, he obeyed his mother, learned a trade from Joseph, and so on. These were human properties of the human nature of the divine Logos who had become man. Hence that term "accessing." The use of this term should not be taken to indicate "distance" in the divine

person's appropriation of its human mind. The Gospels present Jesus as enjoying a seamless human consciousness, with only the occasional and significant distinction between them. Yet within that apparent seamlessness the Logos seems occasionally to identify itself as "I." So in "I have power (or authority) to lay down my life and have power to take it again" it seems likely that this power or authority the Mediator had in virtue of his divine nature. Nevertheless we never learn from the Gospels what it is like "from the inside" to live a two-natured life. (More on this later). This accessing relation is asymmetrical, a one way street for the divine to the human, but barred (or impossible) in the reverse direction. Barred by the creator-creature distinction, we might say. This does not prevent the New Testament from testifying to the closeness of the union by sometimes (using a kind of shorthand) ascribing human properties to God, as in Acts 20:28. This type of literary expression is known as "the communication of properties."

(2) A second feature in the Incarnation of the asymmetrical character of the relation between the divine and the human concerns willing. If we leave statements such as "Jesus is God and man" unparsed this language may suggest otherwise. For such a phrase may suggest that there is a parity between the two, that the Incarnation was a consequence of a willing binding agreement between the divine Person and the human nature. But there are at least two reasons why this could not be so. One is that until the Mediator's growth into consciousness and in understanding of the Mediator, Christ's human nature did not possess a will. And, a related point, by the time of the Incarnation, it was too late! The incarnation was accomplished. By the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit the union of the two was already done.

And the second reason is that the Incarnation was a Trinitarian occurrence, in which each person of the Trinity, not only the Logos, was active. The willing Logos became incarnate in order to do the will of his Father, and his human nature was imbued with the Holy Spirit. So, far from the relationship between the human and the divine being restricted to the Logos, the work was the will of the Triune God entire, each Person playing a characteristically different role in the work. Putting the point more abstractly, the Logos is a person of the Godhead, and fully divine. Hence quite apart from the Mediator's explicitly alluding to the Father and the Holy Spirit, that fact alone is enough to ensure that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each involved. For each is the eternal God, and such involvement is sufficient to

ensure the involvement of the Godhead, and thus of the three persons of the Godhead. It is true that in Incarnation the eternal glory of the Logos (“the glory I had with the Father”) was not displayed, but another, related glory, that of being filled with “grace and truth” (John 1:14) was. Nevertheless we may think with John that the glory that Christ had with his Father was transformed for us by the glory of the Son as the Suffering Servant, full of grace and truth and of his humbling to the death of the cross.

This concurrence of the three persons of the Trinity in the incarnation of the Logos can only be ensured by a classical understanding of the Trinity, each person being wholly the one God. On a social trinitarian understanding, where a generic idea and not a numerical identity of divinity is understood, then the divinity of the Son is distinct from the divinity of the Father, and of the Holy Spirit. The three persons are not one God, but three instances of divinity in the way your humanity is a different instance of humanity than mine.

Both one and two stress asymmetry, as does the third.

(3) Suppose I move my arm, and then I move yours. The two movements are quite different. My movement of my arm is the movement of “ownership.” Under normal circumstances I don’t move it by doing something else in order to move it but I simply move it. (Of course if my right arm is numb through paralysis or for other reasons, say, then it may be that the only way I can move it is in the indirect way, by using my left arm to move it, or by asking someone else to move it.) But when I move your arm then necessarily I have to move it by using one or both of my arms, the arms I “own” and which work naturally for me “from the inside.” Similarly with your thinking. I know my thoughts chiefly through my immediate consciousness and memory, or by a process of inference in my consciousness, but I know your thinking only if you tell me or indicate to me in other ways, say by your “body language.”

In the case of the Incarnation, the human bodily actions of Jesus are “owned” by Jesus in this sort of natural way. There is no artificial “re-routing” of the activity that is involved in moving one’s limbs, such that such activity is more labored. It is not as if the body of Jesus is at a distance from him, or dislocated in some way, rather the reverse. And similarly with his thinking. There are occasions when his growing up involved learning, listening and questioning (Luke 2:46), and that learning by experience was an important aspect of his ministry. Moreover, he learned obedience by the things that he suffered (Heb 5:8). There are times when his knowledge is distinguished

from that of his heavenly Father (Matt 24:36). Such occasions seem to have been rare, but sufficient to indicate that the knowledge that Jesus had was limited. In such instances we may say for clarification, "Jesus, in his human nature," but his knowledge and his ignorance are taken for granted by Christ. Though he undergoes and expresses a variety of emotions, we are given no inkling in the four Gospels what it is like to be a person having both an eternal mind which is all-knowing and a human mind which is temporal and limited in knowledge, except that Jesus meekly accepted the fact, which does not seem to have had particularly disruptive consequences for him. An exception to this is the temptation in Gethsemane. Here, nevertheless, his activity is always through his humanity, localized in time and place as we all are. Another example which might seem to be an exception to this is the Transfiguration (Matt 17:1-8), and also the appearance of the risen Christ to Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3-5).

In his well-known article "The Emotional Life of our Lord," B. B. Warfield does not rule out in principle that Christ's expressions of emotion, his anger, his sorrow, and so on may have been on occasion an expression of his divine nature, but he decides that none that are recorded were.⁴ He notes the reserve that must be used in the venture of distinguishing the human from the divine. How one might discern whether the emotion was an expression of his divine nature, other than being told by Christ himself or by an Evangelist, Warfield does not say. But it is pretty clear that no one could tell by knowing what it was like to have the divine nature, or to have direct access to it, by knowing what it was like to be the God-man. The creature-Creator distinction presents an insurmountable barrier to anything like that.

More could be said about these features of our Lord's humanity and divinity. But the point to be stressed here is that the relationship of Jesus to his humanity and his relationship to his divinity is another case of asymmetry. Jesus does not behave as if he were a man who was unique in that he had access to the mind of God, but as God who had taken on, and so access to, human powers and limitations as his own powers and limitations. His humanity is authentic, never artificial or ethereal, or at a distance, not obviously "bolted on" to his divinity. But once again we are given no inkling from the inside of what it was like to be such a strange Person, a Person who is necessarily divine and who voluntarily takes on human nature.⁵

In summary, so far I have been indicating three ways, all having to do with

the asymmetry between the divine logos and human nature, that enable us to have some apprehension of the mystery of the Incarnation. This is as the result of a number of different factors; we already have some understanding of asymmetrical relations in our everyday experience, as we have been seeing; the scriptural claims about the nature of the Incarnation bear these out. We see, however, that a veil is drawn over any queries of this sort: "What must it or may it be like to be the divine Person united to human nature?" There are no data of Scripture that would encourage such an approach, but rather we find a reticence, a reserve, silence. And in view of what we know about the nature of God as this revealed in Scripture this ought not to be surprising.

So what "apprehension" we may have of the Incarnation cannot be built up "from the inside," what the experience of Jesus was like, but only "from the outside," from Scriptural statements about the nature and activity of God and what it tells us about human nature, men and women made in the image of God, and our disciplined reflection on these.

THE INCARNATION AND GOD'S ETERNAL BEING

To underline these limitations I wish to say something about the relation of the eternal God to time, and then about the relation of God's eternal being to the Incarnation.⁶ The reason for doing this is that we need always to remember that the Godhead and the divine person of the Logos were in no sense diminished or downsized by the Incarnation. Granting poetical license, we may sing with Charles Wesley that in the Incarnation our God was "contracted to a span," for God became man. But he became man not by ceasing to be God, eternal God. He came down to us by taking on our nature, not by diminishing his deity. Kenotic theories proposing the reduction in the powers of the Godhead in order to engage in Incarnation fail to convince, for they play havoc with the doctrine of God. Paul in Colossians states that through and for the Son all things were created, and in him all things hold together; "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:16-17, 19); "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). There is hardly room for kenoticism here.

At the time of the Reformation, in connection with the debates about the Lord's Supper, the insistence that in the Incarnation the deity of God was not diminished was dubbed by the Lutherans the *extra calvinisticum*,

the Calvinists "extra," the implication being that this was something that they had invented. But in reality the Calvinists' insistence on this point might equally well have been called the *extra patristicum*, as David Willis⁷ pointed out. For this is what lay behind the Chalcedonian Definition and was routinely stated by Augustine, for example.

The "emptying" of himself referred to in Philippians 2:7 is best thought not as a "reduction" in the Godhead to smooth out the mystery of the Incarnation, but as the veiling of the Logos's glory and his subordination, in the outworking of the economy of redemption, to do the Father's bidding.

The Incarnation and time

With the tradition at this point I shall assume that God is without time, or apart from time, or exists timelessly, though having all points of created time accessible to his eternal mind. So, bearing in mind what we have been thinking about in regard to the Incarnation we may say that there is no pre-existent Christ with a life-history independent of and prior to the Incarnation. For the eternal God there was no time when he was not incarnated as Jesus of Nazareth. Why not? Because as the Logos, the Son of God is as eternal as the other Trinitarian persons are eternal. After all, the Logos is God.

Supposing that God freely but (as befits his divinity) eternally wills to be incarnate, being our Mediator, incarnate in Jesus Christ. There was no time when the Son of God was not willing himself to be incarnate in our history. That is, God eternally wills that he becomes incarnate in (as far as we can tell) 4-5 BC. Given such willing there is no other life story of God than the one that includes the Incarnation. However, from the perspective of the creature the Incarnation was an event in time that occurred around that time. This means that we must think about time and eternity from two standpoints. From the eternal standpoint, God has timelessly in his mind all that he wills to come to pass in time and so, in the Incarnation, all that is involved in the Logos taking on human nature and as the Mediator, being the person of Jesus of Nazareth whom the Logos assumed. That willing condescension is an aspect of the eternal life of the Godhead, and so of the Logos who is God. But this does not mean that the Incarnation or any other events in creation are themselves timeless. That would be to confuse "God eternally wills the occurrence of an event in time," and "God eternally wills

that an event in time be eternal.”

So there is the standpoint of time and space, the creaturely standpoint, according to which the Incarnation, though long foreshadowed, took place at a certain time in human history, and lasted until the time when a cloud took the risen Christ out of the disciples’ sight (Acts 1:9). That is, at the point when his human history as the God-man on earth came to an end. “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4). From the eternal standpoint there was no time when the Incarnation was not, for the simple reason that the eternal standpoint does not have temporal change. From the creaturely standpoint, conditioned as it is by time and space, Christ “descended” and then “ascended.”

God’s identity and spirituality

God is an eternal spirit, existing in three persons, as we have been reminding ourselves. As God he does not have a body, nor is his mind a created human mind, nor like one. Yet it is confessed that in the Incarnation a human nature is in union with God, in the person of the Logos. The Son becomes two-minded and possesses a human body. He is the God-man. Can we understand this? How are we to approach it? The honest answer to such questions is that we cannot have much understanding of such matters. This is seen by how the church when faced with the mystery of the Incarnation resorted to the use of negative language, as we recognize in some of the phraseology of the Definition of Chalcedon. Here it is confessed that Christ is two-natured yet “*without* confusing the two natures, *without* transmuting one nature into the other, *without* dividing them into two separate categories, *without* contrasting them according to area or function.” And the Definition summarizes the position as “The distinctiveness of each nature is not nullified by the union.”⁸ The theological logic is perhaps more straightforward than the wording itself. It is that in a true Incarnation both the Godhood and the humanity must be undiminished, and that no expressions ought to be used which undermine Christ’s full divinity, or his true humanity.

In discussing this Oliver Crisp writes in one place of the divine nature being “expanded” to include a human nature, and allows himself to think of that nature as, upon Incarnation, “part” of God. He notes that “Christ is a

"part" of God in a "stretched" sense because of the well-known objections to God having proper parts. But aside from this ..."⁹ For instance, defenders of divine simplicity deny that God has any proper parts or properties. Yet it is not easy to determine what is being stretched and what is left un-stretched. It is not just the problem of divine simplicity and Incarnation that are involved here, but more general features of the Godhead, those of God's spirituality and infinity. These also require that "part" be used in a stretched sense.

So the problem of understanding is being addressed by stretching the ordinary senses of the terms being used in the account. This is of course a standard and time-honored way of approaching using language to characterize God, to appeal to metaphor, analogy and the like. It is helpful when considering individual features or attributes of God, but less so in the case of God himself and his relation to what is *ad extra*. The problem becomes truly acute with the case of God being *in union with* an aspect of the creation, human nature.

Part of the discipline of thinking about God and his relationship to the creation or any part of it is the strong tendency we possess, almost an intellectual reflex, to think of God in spatial terms. So it is tempting to think of God as an enormous sac, or perhaps as a gas, clear and translucent, encompassing all of created reality, which occupies a minute fraction of it. As Augustine put it, writing of his way of thinking when as a young man, he was associated with the Manichees,

I conceived even you, life of my life, as a large being, permeating infinite space of every side, penetrating the entire mass of the world, and outside this extending in all directions for immense distances without end; so earth had you, heaven had you, everything had you, and in relation to you all was finite; but you not so ... this was my conjecture, for I was incapable of thinking otherwise, but it was false.¹⁰

Just as we are not encouraged to psychologize the two mindedness of Christ, so we are not encouraged to spatialize the infinity and fullness of the divine being. Indeed we are positively discouraged to do this, to put it mildly. For the need to resist such a temptation seems to be behind the prohibition in the Second Commandment of making images of God.

We might try a different tack, not to provide us with a different conceptuality than the spatial, but to remind ourselves of the inadequacy of

“spatializing” God and the dangers of doing so. There is precedent in Scripture of the use of sounds, of notes, to express the glory of God—thunder, and song, and trumpet blasts, and “like the sound of many waters, the sound of the Almighty” (Ezek 1:24). We might think of God himself as a glorious sound. This is no more foreign to his spiritual being than thinking of God as spatial, yet thinking in these terms might free us of the reflex tendency to think of God spatially. His becoming Incarnate might then be expressed by the start of another sound which modifies our hearing of the original note or chord. Is God changed thereby? No, the original sound is there, but the change is some additional feature that it comes to have. I am making these suggestions seriously, not as a serious theological proposal but suggesting a way of freeing us from the reflex of thinking of God only visually, as an aspect of the discipline that we need to develop when trying to think of God. Theology is much more like adopting and developing a discipline of thought and of ways of thinking in which negation, the denial of what God is, the “stretching” of the meaning of everyday terms, and the freeing of our minds of various intellectual habits, all play their part.

CONCLUSION: CHRIST OUR FOUNDATION

Christians, if they are consistent, are foundationalists in their theology. Christ is our foundation. “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). The church, the household of God, is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20).

So, if Christ is the foundation, even the cornerstone, and his person as incarnate is mysterious, incomprehensible and only apprehended fitfully by our finite and sin-darkened minds, then at the foundation of our faith there is a mystery. This is central to the existence of the church and to the proclamation of the offence of the Cross. Christians exist through a mystery, and at the center of the proclamation of the good news lies a mystery. “Great indeed ... is the mystery of godliness; He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory” (1 Tim 3:16). Who? Christ Jesus the Lord!

- ¹ John Owen, *A Declaration of the Glorious Mystery of the Person of Christ – God and Man* (in *Works*, ed., W. H. Goold; London, Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 44.
- ² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559) (trans. Henry Beveridge; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), I.13.17.
- ³ Part of the Formula of Chalcedon reads “[We] apprehend this one and only Christ – Son, Lord, only-begotten – in two natures without confusing the two natures...” in *The Creeds of the Churches* (ed., John H. Leith; Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1963), 36.
- ⁴ See for example, B. B. Warfield, “The Emotional Life of Our Lord” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (ed., Samuel G. Craig, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 94.
- ⁵ This section is developed from Oliver D. Crisp, *God Incarnate* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 161-62.
- ⁶ The material in these sections arises from things Oliver Crisp says in *Divinity and Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and *God Incarnate*, but also from things that he does not say.
- ⁷ E. David Willis, *Calvin’s Catholic Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1966). For further discussion see Paul Helm, *John Calvin’s Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ch. 3.
- ⁸ John H. Leith ed., *Creeds of the Churches* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books 1963), 36. (Italics added).
- ⁹ Crisp, *God Incarnate*, 162, fn. 18.
- ¹⁰ *Confessions* (trans., Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), VII, I (1), 112.