

Happy Incarnation!

The traditional Christmas season greeting in America is, “Merry Christmas!” Even though our nation has a strong Christian heritage, the winds of political correctness continue to blow. The result is that many companies and advertisers now prefer to say, “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas!” This is unfortunate.

The pull to separate the federally recognized holiday from its spiritual core is strong for those desperate not to offend non-Christians. Rather than merely waging a war about which *season’s greeting* should be issued, it would be wonderful to have a conversation about what Christmas really means.

At its core, Christmas is about the doctrine of the Incarnation. Of course, manger scenes are important, and trees alighted are beautiful, but the babe in swaddling clothes is no mere mortal child—he is God in the flesh. Christmas is about God coming to earth, clothed in human flesh, to save humankind. Since the doctrine of the Incarnation is what we truly celebrate at Christmastime, I propose a new *season’s greeting*: “Happy Incarnation!”

“Happy Incarnation!” is a greeting that literally names the Christian doctrine that is the reason for all the season’s celebration. Because the word “Incarnation” is not commonly used and not typically tied together with the word “happy,” the greeting tends to raise curiosity in those who hear it.

“Happy Incarnation!” “*Happy Incarnation*, what’s that?” And now we have the opportunity explain the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The Doctrine of the Incarnation

The word incarnation means “infleshment.” The central claim of the Incarnation is the deity of Christ. Jesus is God in the flesh. The way to describe this doctrine is to say that the second person of the Trinity—the eternal Logos, God the Son—became a human being without losing any of his divinity. This means that Jesus is the God-man. He is fully divine, and he is fully human.

The Gospel of John describes the Incarnation like this:

“In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God, and the Logos was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind... The Logos became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and

truth... For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” (John 1:1-4,14,17)

The Bible tells us that the Logos is...

- The Word/divine reason. The Greek word *Logos* is translated into English as *Word*.
- Eternal
- Part of the very nature of God
- The Creator (also Gen. 1:1)
- The Author of Life (also Acts 3:15)
- The Image of God (also Gen.1:26-27)
- Jesus Christ

Consider the following texts that also declare Jesus is God:

Philippians 2:6-7—“Jesus, *being in very nature God*, did not consider equality with something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”

Titus 2:11-13—“The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great *God and Savior, Jesus Christ*.”

Theological Results of the Incarnation

There are many theological results of the Incarnation: God can sympathize with us, we can see God more clearly, and the Atonement works. Since the second person of the Trinity took on human flesh, God experienced temptation and trial. God now knows what it is like to be tired and hungry and reliant upon the Scriptures. God is able to sympathize with us because God walked as one of us. Since God walked with us, we can see God more clearly. Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being. God is not distant, but close. God came to us so we could see him better.

The biggest theological result of the Incarnation is that the death and resurrection of Jesus actually covers our sins. The Incarnation is necessary to our salvation. Jesus must be divine for his sacrifice on the cross to cover our sins. Jesus must also be a human being for his sacrifice on the cross to cover our sins.

Jesus must be a human being to fully cover and die for another human being. A perfect, sinless human being can die for another human being. If he is anything less than a human

being, then his sacrifice cannot cover once-and-for-all another human's sin. Other sacrifices would be required later (just like the OT sacrifices needed to be made over and over again). If he is merely a human being, then Jesus cannot cover once-and-for-all multiple human's sin. One sinless human being could only sacrifice himself for one other human being's sin. There would be a 1:1 correspondence. For Jesus's to death cover the sins of everyone who would believe in him, then he must be more than a human being—he must be divine. If Jesus is God in the flesh, then his death can cover an unlimited number of human beings and their sin. The Incarnation says that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine.

Three Critical Distinctions to Help us Understand the Incarnation

A distinction is simply a way of separating two closely related concepts to better understand them both rather than mixing them together into a confusing jumble.

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| 1. Individual Essence | 2. Common Properties | 3. Fully Human |
| Kind Essence | Essential Properties | Merely Human |

These distinctions are drawn very nicely in Thomas Morris' wonderful book, *The Logic of God Incarnate*. The first distinction is between an Individual Essence and Kind Essence. An Individual Essence is everything you are, the total composite of your being. One's Individual Essence includes physical and non-physical properties. A Kind Essence is the group, or kind, to which you belong. Examples include humankind (your preacher), feline kind (your cat), canine kind (your dog), amphibian kind (the frog in the pond).

The second distinction is between Common Properties and Essential Properties. A Common Properties are characteristics that most members in a given kind will have. For instance, most members of humankind are between three and seven feet tall. Of course, there are members of humankind that are shorter than three feet tall (babies) and members of humankind that are taller than seven feet tall (Shaquille O'Neil, Goliath, etc.)

Essential Properties are characteristics that one must have to be a member of a given kind. For example, to qualify as a member of humankind, one must have (or at least had at one point) a hominid body and a soul made in the image of God.

The third distinction is between being Merely Human and being Fully Human. One is Merely Human if one only has the essential properties to be in the humankind and does not have the essential properties to belong to another kind group as well. One is Fully Human if one has all the essential properties to be in the humankind.

This means that someone who is Fully Human is also Merely Human if that person only has the essential properties to be a member of humankind. It also means that someone who is Fully Human might not be Merely Human if that person also has the

essential properties to gain membership into another kind-group as well. Someone who is Merely Human must also be Fully Human, but someone who is Fully Human might not be Merely Human.

Jesus Christ has an individual essence which includes his human nature and his divine nature. It includes his attitudes, physical characteristics, and his mental states. While everyone has only one individual essence, Jesus has two kind essences. He is a member of both humankind and divine kind since he possesses all the essential properties necessary to both groups. Jesus is fully human, but he is not merely human. He has all the essential human properties and he has all the essential divine properties. Jesus is God in the flesh.

Four Key Phrases to Help us Explain the Incarnation

- A. Jesus Christ is one person with two distinct and complete natures—human and divine.
- B. The Logos is the rational soul of Jesus—which is possible since mankind is made in the image of God.
- C. The divine aspects of Jesus Christ were largely subliminal during the Incarnation—which is necessary for Jesus to have a typical human experience.
- D. Jesus ceded the privileges of being God without relinquishing the position of being God.

The first key explanatory phrase is “A. Christ is one person with two distinct and complete natures—human and divine.” The reason that these two natures do not contradict is because human beings are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). Since human beings are made in God’s image, the properties that comprise humanity are not contradictory of the properties that comprise divinity. Both have freedom, creativity, rationality, etc. While it is true that God cannot be created, only the body of Jesus was created, which leads us to our next explanatory phrase.

The second explanatory phrase is “B. The Logos is the rational soul of Jesus—which is possible since mankind is made in the image of God.” The second person of the Trinity (the Logos) is uncreated and eternal. Not only that, but because humanity was made in God’s image, the Logos already possessed everything necessary for full and complete membership into humankind except for a body. Jesus was given a miraculously created body at the virgin conception. Jesus Christ’s soul was uncreated, but his body was created. These two truths are not contradictory at all. But how would Jesus have normal human life if he was also God? On to our next explanatory phrase.

“C. The divine aspects of Jesus Christ were largely subliminal during the Incarnation—which is necessary for Jesus to have a typical human experience.” Little baby Jesus did not know he was God in the flesh. 12-year-old Jesus did not know he was God in the flesh, just that he was not the same as everyone else. Adult Jesus knew he was God in the flesh, but in his waking consciousness, did not know everything God knows. Everyone knows more in their sub-consciousness than they can hold in their waking consciousness.

Because of his human body, Jesus had a typical waking consciousness. But because he is also the divine Logos, Jesus had an infinite and unlimited sub-consciousness that knows everything. The reason this does not make Jesus so unlike other human beings, is because he did not have access to the information in his sub-consciousness any more than any other human being has access to his sub-consciousness, which is explained by our last phrase.

“D. Jesus ceded the privileges of being God without relinquishing the position of being God.” Jesus had to maintain the position of being God for his sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection to save us. Jesus had to live among us like the rest of us, dependent on the Father and the Spirit, needing to sleep and eat, able to die, etc. to be the perfect and effective sacrifice. If Jesus had access to all his God-powers all the time, then his experience would be far different from other human experiences.

Think about it like this: could you beat up Chuck Norris in a fight? No. It would be unfair. But things would be much fairer if his hands were handcuffed behind his back. He would still be Chuck Norris; he just would not be able to punch you (he would just kick you). Jesus took on a human body, which limited his ability to utilize his God-powers, but he was still God in the flesh.

The Season’s Greeting of Choice: “Happy Incarnation!”

Say “Happy Incarnation!” this Christmas season. Jesus is the reason for the season, but the reason Jesus is so special is that he is God in the flesh. The Incarnation is one of the most central Christian doctrines. Christians should know that Jesus is God in the flesh. Christians should talk about the Incarnation and its importance. Christians should explain the doctrine and why it makes sense.

So rather than saying, “Merry Christmas,” say “Happy Incarnation!” It will surely spark a conversation. Bless people by declaring the truth that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh.