

Dear Friends,

What is the significance of the Incarnation? Of God entering His created universe? More to the point, what is the significance of His entering His world as He entered it, a man born into a common and rather poor family? Gnosticism, a non-Christian worldview, attempted to invade Christianity in the first century, but its basic tenets were so anti-Christian that New Testament writers recorded their rejection of it for all future generations who might be enticed by it to read. **W**hy did John, more than any other New Testament writer, use the term "Word" to refer to God Incarnate? I believe the answer to all these questions centers on the same idea. God Incarnate, especially God coming into humanity as He did, is God's crowning speech, His personal communication to His people. In this week's study verse we see Him as the source of both grace and truth, but more significantly we see Him exemplifying grace and truth so that we may know what it looks like and how it behaves if put to practice in our own lives. How many times does the New Testament refer to Jesus as our example? **D**o we model grace in our ordinary conversations with others? On occasion I have observed professing Christians who view themselves and having a special gift for truth; "I tell it like I see it whether folks like it or not." However, often this assertion actually is a thinly veiled effort to impose harsh cruelty onto others without taking responsibility for one's hatefulness. If you were to ask this same person how much grace they try to exhibit in their words, they'd probably not know how to answer your question. We necessarily lean on divine grace for our salvation, but do we in turn model that grace in our interactions with others? In our attitudes toward others? Jesus suffered more animosity than almost any person who ever lived. He suffered more undeserved hatred and cruel treatment. Yet even in those moments He modeled grace and truth in a delightful and unique blend that calls us to imitate it. How do we react when people treat us with cruel, unfair, or inappropriate treatment? Our words and attitudes at those moments in life tell us more sometimes than we care to know about our true Christianity. It isn't terribly difficult to model grace and truth when everything is going our way. What do we do when everything seems to be going against us, and people seem—from our personal perception—to be so unfair to us? Our conduct in those moments—indeed our conduct toward those very people—will measure our true Christian maturity, or it will publish for all to see our sad lack thereof. **G**od helps us to live "Incarnational" lives to the glory of God and not for ourselves,

Joe Holder

Incarnation: God Made Flesh

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. ([Joh 1:14](#))

In a graceless, sometimes cruel, world we delight to consider that the source and ultimate expression of grace entered this world and showed us how grace really looks and acts. In a world where truth increasingly is viewed (frighteningly even among some who profess to be Christians) as wholly relative and personal rather than factual and transcendent we should take note of that One whose very life from beginning to end manifested only truth.

Perhaps the nature of the Incarnation has been more disputed and rejected than any single truth of Christianity. If we accept the majority view—I do—that John wrote his letters near the end of the first century, we should consider that Gnostic heresy was making a concerted effort to invade and take over Christianity, but the apostles and early Christians soundly rejected it. In [Col 2:20-23](#) Paul confronted and rejected a core Gnostic error. The whole first general letter of John (First John) confronts docetic Gnosticism, a specific form of Gnosticism that rejected the whole idea of the Incarnation. These people taught that God could not become anything material, but they could not wholly deny the Incarnation in the presence of many eyewitnesses. Therefore they had to explain the Incarnation so as to avoid its true implications. They taught that Jesus appeared to be material, to live in a material human body, but it was only an appearance. In fact, according to them, He never was really flesh and blood; rather He appeared in a “spirit body” or some such form as to leave the impression that He was material, but He really wasn’t. One of the dominant and unifying themes of First John is a frontal assault against this heretical idea. In fact John introduces us to the word “antichrist” in this context when referring to those who rejected the idea that He really came in the flesh.

I believe John presents a distinctly unique record of the life of Jesus in his gospel for this same reason. While we could readily prove both the deity and humanity of Jesus from the other three gospels, John’s gospel makes Jesus’ deity its primary emphasis, but John never allows us to forget that Jesus—God eternal—lived in a real human, material body from conception in a virgin’s womb to resurrection and ascension. In fact John may have asserted that Jesus retained that body after the ascension. ([Joh 3:13](#); if the words of this verse are spoken by Jesus, they assert that Jesus remained fully God during the Incarnation, a truth that few would care to deny, but if the words are spoken by John as he wrote his gospel, he asserts that Jesus retained His human body after the ascension. In [Col 2:9](#) Paul specifically uses the present tense verb to

make this same point; "...in him dwelleth the fullness of the godhead bodily." Do not miss the final adjective in the sentence, "*bodily*."

In the maze of divergent ideas among professing Christians of our age few ideas are as alien to Biblical and historical Christianity as the rejection of the Incarnation. This doctrine is so central to Biblical Christianity that a person cannot deny the Incarnation and credibly claim to be a Christian! In developing the idea of "made flesh" A. T. Robertson emphatically makes the point of Jesus altogether real humanity and equally altogether real deity.

"To explain the exact significance of ἐγένετο [*egeneto*] in this sentence is beyond the powers of any interpreter" (Bernard). Unless, indeed, as seems plain, John is referring to the Virgin Birth as recorded in Matthew and Luke. "The Logos of philosophy is, John declares, the Jesus of history" (Bernard). Thus John asserts the deity and the real humanity of Christ. He answers the Docetic Gnostics who denied his humanity.^[1]

In subsequent times a rather wide variety of ideas would surface to compromise the essential truth of the Incarnation. Among these ideas are such notions as these.

1. The Word was created and inferior to God (Arianism and modern Watch Tower teachings).
2. Various forms of modalism, the idea that rejects the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity. In its various wardrobes modalism teaches that Jesus is merely a mode of God's manifestation of Himself to humanity. It rejects the unique and personal character of Father, Son or Word, and Holy Spirit. Thus modalism logically depicts Jesus as being a skilled ventriloquist when He prays to the Father and the Father responds.
3. The divine Word and the humanity co-existed together in one body but were never so integrated as to be actually considered one being or person. Sometimes in an effort to understand or to express Incarnation truth we hear people refer to the "God-part" of Jesus or the "man-part" of Jesus. While I would not accuse those who make these statements as holding to the ancient heresy of either Apollinarianism ("...that the one person of Christ had a human body but not a human mind or spirit, and that the mind and spirit of Christ were from the divine nature of the Son of God") or Nestorianism ("...that there were two separate persons in Christ, a human person and a divine person, a teaching that is distinct from the Biblical view that sees Jesus as one person.")^[2]
4. Monophysitism or Etychianism, the idea that the human nature and the divine nature combined to form a wholly new nature, not fully man nor fully God.

John does not write that the Logos, the eternal Word, entered a human being, but that he was *made flesh*. In the first eighteen verses of John's gospel we find incredibly precise language that effectively confronts the major errors that would surface across future ages regarding the nature of the Incarnation. John deals with them as if they were present realities and rejects the foundations of their errant teachings.

What practical implications should we see in the truth of the Incarnation? John first leads us through the amazing and deep waters of profound truth regarding the nature and character of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. Then he seamlessly leads us directly from that timeless foundation directly into the practical implications of Incarnation truth. "...full of grace and truth;" he does not merely tell us that Jesus was graceful and truthful, but rather he tells us that Jesus, God Incarnate, the principle subject of his letter to this point, *was full of both grace and truth*.

Do you not hear John's words echo in the background when Paul wrote to the Colossians, "*Let your speech be alway with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man.*" ([Col 4:6](#)) Paul did not teach that our words toward our favorite friends should be seasoned with grace; he requires that all our words at all times are to be so seasoned. I recall a time when I observed a church member who became angry at a contractor who was working on church property and angrily cursed at the man. This single shameless and sinful act destroyed this church's reputation in the eyes of this worker and anyone whom he knew. I recall more occasions than I care to when professing Christians used angry and hateful words either to or about other Christians. Perhaps more than any other single practical truth of New Testament Christianity Christians manifest a sad deficit in this core Biblical requirement that those who profess to follow the One who lived His whole life full of grace and truth are to live with those same traits constantly dominant in their lives. Jesus faced intense criticism and rejection throughout His public life, not just during the last week when He was arrested, scourged, and crucified. During every occasion of scorn when sinful (and people who interestingly claimed to be highly religious) men maligned Him He never responded with anything other than truth and grace. The professing Christian who rationalizes hateful and harsh words toward anyone, stranger or fellow-Christian, has rejected the most basic truth of the Incarnation. If Jesus is our example, a point that Scripture repeatedly affirms, we are then required to manifest in our lives traits of grace and truth that respectfully honor our Lord and His example. May we live holy Incarnational lives!

Elder Joe Holder

[1] A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol.V c1932, Vol.VI c1933 by Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention. (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), [Joh 1:14](#).

[2] Both of the quotes in this paragraph come from Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology*.

Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994) 554-555.