

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
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. . . AND WAS INCARNATE

The term *incarnation*, observes Phillip Cary, “has had a long history since the Creed, and is no longer used only by Christians. So we need to be clear: when the Creed uses the term, it is referring to no one but Jesus Christ. Incarnation is not the same as embodiment, for every living human being is embodied, but only Christ is God incarnate. Nor should it be confused with reincarnation, a modern term for an ancient religious doctrine that is alien to Christianity. Reincarnation is a very widespread notion, common in ancient Greece as well as India, that is almost always tied to the desire to escape from embodiment and the wheel of rebirth by which each soul keeps coming to earth as yet another human being who suffers and dies. It is a desire pushing people in the opposite direction from the humiliation that the Son of God chose for himself in becoming flesh.”¹ John 1:14-18 clearly states that Jesus is the eternal Word who was with God before the beginning and is God manifested in the flesh. Verse 14 speaks of the fact of the incarnation: “Jesus Christ was born of the virgin Mary in the stable of Bethlehem. But the second person of the Trinity did not come into being at this birth. John says, *In the beginning was the Word*, and then at a certain time, *The Word became flesh*.” God the Son – the Word – did not come to existence in his incarnation, but he became a human being in addition to a divine being. The Westminster Confession explains, *The Son of God . . . being very and eternal God . . . did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin* (8:1). Christ’s incarnation means that the Son of God became human in the fullest sense, without losing any of his divinity. Paul says, *In him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily* (Col. 2:9). Likewise, Jesus is sinless without losing his full humanity. His is uncorrupted, true humanity.”² Another New Testament passage that speaks of the coming of Christ into the world and his incarnation in Hebrews 10:5-10. C. H. Spurgeon captures the thrust of the text by saying, “He who assumed that body was existent before that body was prepared. He says, *A body hast thou prepared for me. Lo, I come*. He from old eternity dwelt with God: the Word was in the beginning with God, and the Word was God. We could not any one of us have said that a body was prepared for us, and therefore we would come to it; for we had had no existence before our bodies were fashioned. From everlasting to everlasting our Lord is God, and he comes out of eternity into time – the Father bringing him into the world. He was before all worlds and was before he came into the world to dwell in his prepared body.”³

- I. **DO THE WILL OF THE FATHER.** The text declares, “I have come to do Thy will, O God.” Jesus announced that “I have come down from Heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). Likewise, Jesus expresses the same thought in the Garden of Gethsemane. “Arius seems to have been the first to use the story of Jesus’ struggle in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as proof that the Son always has to submit to his Father’s will (Mk. 14:32-42; pars. Mt. 26:36-46; Lk. 22:40-46; cf. Jn. 12:27; Heb. 5:7-8). In the garden Jesus prays, *Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what you want*” (Mk. 14:36). Certainly the text indicates a real struggle for Jesus. The thought of going to the cross filled him with dread. It is also clear at this point in time Jesus faced a conflict between what he

willed and what he knew the Father willed. As a full human being he feared the suffering that lay ahead, and he wished to avoid it. In this scene it is the incarnate Son in the form of a servant who prays to his Father in heaven for strength and courage to fulfill the mission he has freely undertaken for the salvation of men and women. Possibly no other story in the New Testament so profoundly presents what it meant for him who was equal with God to become man. To suggest that from this earthly story set unambiguously in the time of the Son's humiliation we learn something of the eternal heavenly relationship of the Father and the Son is a mistake. In any case, this story does not depict a battle of wills where the Father prevails over the Son. It depicts rather the incarnate Son praying for strength to do the Father's will despite his fear of the suffering this would entail. In John's gospel Jesus prays a rather different prayer just before his arrest. Clearly echoing the Garden of Gethsemane prayer of the Synoptics, Jesus prays, *Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say – 'Father, save me from this hour?' No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour* (Jn 12:27). In John's gospel, Jesus' prayer is entirely a declaration of his intent to do his Father's will. We see no struggle in this text between the Son's will and that of his Father. The Son's will is solely to do the Father's will. This interpretation of Jesus' prayer perfectly matches the way John the evangelist thinks of the Father-Son relationship."⁴

- II. ***A BODY PREPARED FOR THE SON.*** In order for the Son to perform the will of God required a *body*. The text that the author to the Hebrews cites for support in Psalm 40:7 which in Hebrews reads, "but you have pieced (or dug) my ears and I have not been rebellious."⁵ The Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament (which is cited repeatedly in Hebrews) reads "but you have prepared a body for me." The great Puritan theologian John Owen "contends that we have here an example of synecdoche, that is, the use of a part for the whole, in this instance the ears for the body, *because as it is impossible that anyone should have ears of any use but by virtue of his having a body, so the ears are that part of the body by which alone instruction unto obedience, the thing aimed at, is received.*"⁶
- III. ***THE SON ANNOUNCES HIS COMING INTO THE WORLD.*** The language expresses the thought and will of the incarnate Saviour, in the whole of His conscious work for God.⁷ Guthrie points out, "It should be noted that the Greek text does not mention the name of Christ in this verse, but merely uses the third person. The writer assumes that everyone will at once identify him who *came into the world*. The title *Christ* is carried over from 9:28. There is no question that the author is convinced about the reality of the pre-existence of Christ."⁸

CONCLUSION: The body prepared for the Son was the body he assumed in the incarnation in which he obeyed the Father's will, even to the death of the cross (Heb. 2:14; 5:8; 12:2; Phil. 2:8). "As the Word who is immortal and the Father's Son it was not possible for him to die," explains Athanasius, "and this is the reason why he assumed a body capable of dying, so that, belonging to the Word who is above all, in dying it might become a sufficient exchange for all. . . . When he offered his own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all he fulfilled in death all that was required." Again: "He put on a body so that in the body he might find death and blot it out." Moreover, "he was not limited and confined by the body, but held it under his control so that he was both in it and also in all things and outside all created things, reposing in the Father alone; indeed, the wonderful thing is that at one and the same time as man he was living a human life, as Word he was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son he was in constant union with the Father."⁹ Beale and Carson point out that the Old Testament text, "demonstrates that there is a temporal sequence inherent to the psalm, indicating, *He annuls the first to establish the second* (10:9). Using a rabbinic technique by which the literal meaning of a word rivets attention, the author of Hebrews interprets the *then* (*tote*) in the text as indicative of that sequence. God annuls one covenant in order to establish the second (10:9)."¹⁰ Doug Kelly, one of my seminary professors, helpfully explains, "One could ask why animal sacrificial blood only covered sins, without finally removing it. The reasons seem to be threefold: (1) the blood must be offered from within humanity, where the sin was originally committed,

that is, from human personality, and (2) the person and his blood must be of infinite worth. (3) Scripture also teaches that animals are not created in the image of God as is humankind. Hence the incarnation of Christ is fully fitting in that he becomes a man who, being in the image of God, is the crown of the created order. Therefore, Christ alone, God in human nature, would be able to offer such a finally availing sacrifice. Hebrews 10:5-12 makes this difference between the Levitical sacrifices and the sacrifice of Christ crystal clear. It interprets Psalm 40:6 as referring to *the body* God prepared for his Son (Heb. 10:5), and contrasts that to the *burnt offerings* in which God had no pleasure (Heb. 10:6), as well as *sacrifice* (v. 8). It further contrasts the necessary daily repetitions of the Levitical sacrifices with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, after which, unlike the High Priest in the Tabernacle/Temple (which had no chair in the holy of holies), he could sit down in completion of his finished work (cf. Heb. 10:12 and 1:3). This work was consummately perfect: *For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified* (Heb. 10:14).”¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ Phillip Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2023), p. 110.

² D. M. Doriani, P. G. Ryken, R. D. Phillips, *The Incarnation In the Gospels* (P&R, 2022), p. 172.

³ *A Treasury of Spurgeon On The Life and Work of Our Lord I* (rpt. Baker Book House, 1979), p. 496.

⁴ Kevin Giles, *Jesus And The Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent The Doctrine of The Trinity* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 121. He goes on to say, “John never envisages a disjunction in will or work between the Father and the Son. He consistently teaches that the Son does the works of the Father (5:17, 19; 10:32, 37; 14:10-11). What Jesus does the Father does and vice versa. They work as one. C. K. Barrett speaks of *the complete continuity between the work of the Father and the work of the Son. Rather than suggesting the functional subordination of the Son, John implies the functional equality of the Father and the Son.* This is not of course to imply that John does not clearly distinguish the two divine *persons*. The Son comes from the Father (3:31; 6:33-42) and returns to the Father (13:1-3; 14:28; 16:28). The Father is the one who sends, and the Son is he who is sent by the Father. The Son does the Father’s will not vice versa. However, as we have just seen, none of this language subordinates the Son to the Father. It differentiates them, certainly, and allows for no confusing of the persons, but it does not negate their profound unity and equality. Indeed it suggests that the Father and the Son always work harmoniously and reciprocally together in an orderly manner. Augustine holds that such comments indicate neither that the Son is *less nor equal, but only intimate that he is from the Father*” (p. 122). More recently, B. D. Crowe highlights this as it pertains to the covenant of redemption (the *pactum salutis*). “This concept refers to an eternal, intra Trinitarian *covenant* by which the Son freely agreed to serve as the Mediator of the covenant of grace for the redemption of his people. Biblical support for this doctrine is marshaled from texts that speak of the Son’s coming to accomplish salvation (e.g., John 6:38-40; 17:4), of things that were granted to the Son (e.g., Luke 22:29), of the Son’s being chosen (e.g., 1 Pet 1:20), and of the preexistent work of the Son in the Old Testament. This does not entail subordination in the Godhead nor the division of the will of God, since Father and Son share the same will and Christ’s obedience is the obedience of the economy of redemption, which does not entail any sort of subordination of essence of the Son to the Father. This means our Savior is fully God who became a man and obeyed for us – not because he was required to but because of his love for us (see Rom. 5:8).” *The Biblical Doctrine of The Person and Work of Christ* (Lexham Academic, 2023), p. 197.

⁵ Calvin writes, “Some think that this phrase has been borrowed from an ancient legal ritual (Exod. 21:6). If anyone refused the freedom of the jubilee and wanted to pledge himself to perpetual slavery, his ear was bored with an awl. They want the sense to be, *Lord, thou shalt have me as a servant bound to thee forever.* I take this otherwise as an expression that he is attentive and obedient. We are deaf until God opens our ears, that is, corrects the stubbornness which is inherent in us.” *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries XII* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 136.

⁶ As cited in P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary On The Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 396.

⁷ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary On The Epistle To The Hebrews II* (rpt. Klock & Klock, 1978), p. 150.

⁸ D. Guthrie, *Hebrews: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 1983), p. 203.

⁹ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 395.

¹⁰ G. Beale & D. Carson, *Commentary On The New Testament Use of The Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2007), p. 978.

¹¹ D. F. Kelly, *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor, 2014), p. 429.