

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Nicene Creed		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	22		Gary L.W. Johnson
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GOD INCARNATE

The expression “came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit” constitutes, in the words of Phillip Cary, “the Creed’s most important statement about what the church’s tradition calls *the Trinity*. Every work of God is the one work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Like the very essence of God, it originates with the Father, is given to the Son, and is brought to completion by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Greek church father Gregory of Nyssa says that God’s power always *flows forth from the Father as from a spring, is put to work by the Son, and the grace is perfected by the power of the Holy Spirit*. The fact that every work of God is the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in one action is fundamental for Gregory, because it is why Christians insist that there is only one God. The oneness of God’s work is not mere cooperation, as Paul and Barnabas and Silas might work together in the same ministry – and then perhaps have a falling out and go their separate ways. There is only one God, so every work of God is necessarily and inseparably the work of the whole Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹

Back in the mid-90’s, I preached a series of sermons on *The Apostles’ Creed*. Just before I finished the series I met with an individual who informed me that he had decided to leave Redeemer and find another church because the preaching here did not make him feel good. He went on to explain that he thought this was what preaching should really aim to do, and if I were to change my style and emphasis in the pulpit, the church would attract more people and have a better ministry. When I asked him to explain what “feel good” preaching meant, he quickly responded by saying it must be *Biblical* in nature (but of course), but not distinctively *doctrinal* (as if the two were somehow in conflict). He ended up giving me some specific sermon topics like “Improving Your Marriage” and “Coping with Stress.” He concluded by advising me to lighten up in the pulpit by telling more jokes and humorous anecdotes. Earlier in this century, J. Gresham Machen took note of this same kind of mindset and called this syndrome the “tyranny of the practical.” In Machen’s day, this was what characterized the growing liberalism in the mainline denominations. Today it is a crisis that is welling up within the ranks of professing Evangelicals. Increasingly, Evangelicals choose the churches they attend not because of any specific doctrinal concerns, but because of the smorgasbord of programs offered to meet “felt needs.” What really matters is how I feel and what I experience. Since theology or doctrine does not make me feel good, then I will find a church that caters to my need to feel good. This is, I submit, symptomatic of a very large number of people who flock to the various mega-churches today. But it is also dangerous. It is dangerous because it is impossible to live the Christian life in the absence of Christian truth.³

“When we hear of some great undertaking to be performed, we inquire, of course, about the person who is chiefly concerned in it; so, when we are told of the mighty works Jesus Christ engaged to perform, to redeem a lost world, to satisfy Divine justice, to make an end of sin, to abolish death, and to bring life and immortality to light; the first question that occurs is, *Who is he?* So inquired good old John Newton, the 18th century hymn-writer who gave us *Amazing Grace*. Newton directs us to Isaiah 9:6-7 and says: *The text, if it*

stood alone in the Bible (supposing the Scriptures to be a revelation from God), would be a full warrant and firm foundation, for that great point of Christian faith and doctrine, that Jesus Christ is very God and very man.”⁵ The context of the passage from Isaiah must not be ignored. Beginning in 9:1, the prophet’s words describe darkness and gloom all about! It is a time of great distress. All around the prophet were clouds of darkness. “He heard,” said Spurgeon, “prophetic thunders roaring, and he saw flashes of the lightnings of divine vengeance; clouds and darkness, for many a league, were scattered through history; but he saw far away a bright spot – one place where the clear shining came down from heaven.”⁶ Isaiah calls this “a great light.” The darkness of sin can only be dispelled by light, and light is the gift of God (Genesis 1:3). “It cannot be produced from a human heart which itself is in darkness. The whole work of Christ and all the blessings which He brings may be characterized by the one word *light*.”⁷ In Isaiah 7:15 (cited in Matthew 1:23), the virgin born son called “Immanuel” is announced. Now the child who brings light and rejoicing (9:3) is introduced in greater detail.

I. **THE NAMES OF THE IMMANUEL CHILD.** The word “child” appears first in the Hebrew text, for all the weight and emphasis fall upon it – and it is *for us* that He is to be born.⁸ The Child is worthy to bear these names. They are accurate descriptions and designations of His being and character. In the Bible, the name indicates the character, essence or nature of a person or object. As Young correctly points out, “When, therefore, it is stated that He shall be called we are to understand that the following names are descriptive of the Child and deserve to be borne by Him.”⁹ The translation of the KJV gives the impression that there are five names, but actually there are four (as rendered in the NIV). These are double-membered names.

A. **Wonderful Counsellor** (Hebrew *pele yoetz*). The word “wonderful” is not an adjective but a noun, so literally this expression is “Wonder-Counsellor.” As a *Counsellor*, He is a *Wonder*. There is none like Him. The word *pele* is used in Exodus 15:11 and Psalm 77:15 to describe the acts of God. In Judges 13:18 the Angel reveals the fact that He is deity by stating: “Why do you ask my name? It is Wonderful.” This, as Hengstenberg observes, “means my whole nature is wonderful, of unfathomable depth, and cannot therefore be expressed by any human name.”¹⁰ Such counselling is only given by God (cf. Psalm 16:7; 32:8 and especially Isaiah 28:29). To designate this child with such a title is to make the clearest affirmation that e is deity.¹¹

B. **Mighty God** (Hebrew *‘el gibbor*). In prose the word *‘el* usually appears with other words such as *‘el Shaddai*, *‘el ‘elyon*. Liberal scholars have argued that *‘el gibbor* does not refer to deity since *‘el* in the plural (*Elohim*) may have reference to men (as in Psalm 82:1, 6). But *‘el*, especially in Isaiah, is always used in reference to God alone (cf. 10:21). Furthermore, it is used as a personal name (Isaiah 31:3 cf. also Jeremiah 32:18 and Deuteronomy 10:17). The Gospels repeatedly stress the power of Christ (Matthew 28:18). Jesus declares that He has overcome the world (John 16:33); we may be of good cheer because our Savior is the “mighty God.”

C. **The Everlasting Father** (Hebrew *abshi ‘ad*). “The word *‘ad*,” says Young, “signifies perpetuity or duration. It may have the sense of eternity, as when Isaiah speaks of the *high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity . . .* (57:15).”¹² This again signifies that character of the Child. Elsewhere we read of God described as Father (Isaiah 63:16; Psalm 103:13). Why is the Son called the Father? It is in relation to His people. He is a King who cares for His subjects the way a father cares for his children (cf. Isaiah 22:21; 2 Kings 13:14; Psalm 68:5). The quality of this fatherhood is defined by the word eternity. Again, this can only have reference to deity.¹³ “The name means that the Messiah is eternal and paternal in relation to His people.”¹⁴

D. **The Prince of Peace** (Hebrew *sar shalom*). This stands purposely at the end and is very emphatic. He establishes Peace. In as much as the peace to be made is eternal, it becomes obvious that more than a temporary cessation of earthly hostilities is in view here. The *cause* of all strife and

misery must be addressed, namely, human sin. Peace can only be established when sin is addressed – this first and foremost – has reference to the enmity which existed between God and humanity. The Prince of Peace must make peace by dealing with sin – and this is exactly what the Lord Jesus did do (cf. Romans 5:1).

CONCLUSION: Taken together, the four names given to this child are an extension of the name *Immanuel*. He does only what God can do because of who He is, “God-with-us.” Let us heed the words of the Puritan Thomas Manton on this passage: “To increase our reverence, and that the ignominy of his cross may not obscure his glory, nor lessen his respect in our hearts, but that we may have high and honourable thoughts of our humbled Lord in his lowest estate. Let us give much thought to Isaiah 9:6, 7, and why so? . . . When we are meditating only upon his humiliation, the natural atheism which is in our hearts is apt to turn those thoughts into a snare, and our respects to the majesty of Christ are abated. Therefore we ought again and again to consider his divine nature, and that glorious estate wherein he was from the beginning, so to balance our thoughts of his humiliation.”¹⁵ **What child is this? He is Jesus, the One who saves His people from their sin. He is Immanuel.**

ENDNOTES

¹ P. Cary, *The Nicene Creed: An Introduction* (Lexham Press, 2023), p. 114.

² J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Eerdmans, 1946), p. 56.

³ This theme is handsomely developed by R. Scott Clark in his article, “The Importance of Being More than Earnest” in *Modern Reformation* (Sept./Oct. 1996), pp. 10-12.

⁴ *The Works of John Newton II* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 340.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *A Treasury of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of Our Lord: The Messiah* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 107.

⁷ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-18* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 325.

⁸ Young writes: “Isaiah had already pointed out (7:14) that the Messiah would be with us (*Immanuel*) to bring us blessing; here He is to be for us (*Lanu*). At the same time this *lanu* is to be contrasted with the *lakem* (to you) of Isaiah 7:14.” *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

¹⁰ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament I* (rpt. MacDonald Publishing Co., N.D.), p. 449. “Revelation 19:12 is to be compared, where Christ has a name written that no man knows but He himself to intimate the immeasurable glory of His nature. That which is here, in the first instance, said to all others, holds true of His whole nature; the King is a Wonder as a Counsellor, because His whole person is Wonderful,” *Ibid.*

¹¹ This is an example of what is known as “prophetic paradoxes.” A prophetic paradox is made up of two or more prophecies to its fulfillment, seems impossible to solve. Consider some of these impossible contrasts: God will come to earth to be born as a child. The Messiah will be begotten by God, yet He will be God. He will be providentially, even miraculously, fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Cf. F. John Meldau, *The Prophets Still Speak: Messiah in Both Testaments* (rpt. Christian Victory Publishing, 1988), p. 37.

¹² Young, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

¹³ Note the remarks of the Puritan giant, John Owen: “And this may be added to the other names of God that are attributed to Christ: as *Adonai*, Psalm 110:1; *Elohim*, Psalm 45:6; Hebrews 1:8; *Jehovah*, Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16; Malachi 3:1; Psalm 83:18; *God*, John 1:1; *The true God*, 1 John 5:20; *the great God*, Titus 2:1.” *The Works of John Owen*, XII (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976,) p. 315.

¹⁴ Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A New Translation and Commentary* (The Spearhead Press, 1971), p. 165.

¹⁵ *The Works of Thomas Manton XX* (Maranatha, N.D.), p. 403.