

“THE GLORY OF THE INCARNATION.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Sermon Texts: Philippians 2:5-8

Belgic Confession: Article 18

Introduction.

Things are a mess in Washington DC these days. We need someone who can bring the two sides together and bridge the gap that divides them.

This sort of thing happens a lot in our world. Management and unions, owners and players, husbands and wives, business partners. Sometimes we need someone to come in and stand in the middle, someone who can listen to both parties and represent both sides and help them resolve the conflict and come back together.

The fundamental problem in our world is not disease or greenhouse gases or unbalanced budgets or terrorism. The fundamental problem in our world is spiritual, it's the broken relationship we have with God. The fundamental problem in our world is the wrath of a holy and just God.

We need a mediator, someone who can stand in the middle and represent both sides.

We are separated and estranged from God, all relationship and communication is broken. We all like sheep have gone astray. There is none who is righteous, none who seeks God. We are hostile to God and God's wrath will be revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness of man.

Ephesians 2:12 ... remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

The OT anticipates our need for a mediator and shows us several mediators. The prophets represented God to the people. The priests represented the people to God. The sacrifices were meant as a substitute for sin, to take away the guilt.

But these mediators were inadequate. The prophets came and went and were often rejected and killed. The priests had to make sacrifices for their own sins and the blood of bulls and goats couldn't completely take away the sins of the world.

The reconciliation in the OT was limited and incomplete. The inadequacy of the OT mediation was meant to make us long for and look for a better and greater mediator.

To borrow a J.I. Packer illustration, to have a broken down car is better than nothing, but it's frustrating and makes us long for a better one (Packer, *God's Words*, p. 111).

We need a better covenant with better promises holding out a stronger hope and a more permanent sacrifice.

We need a better mediator.

Belgic Confession, Article 18.

Last week we saw how Genesis 3:15 was the very earliest Gospel message, the first promise of God that after our fall into sin, He would provide a way of salvation. Throughout the OT there was a progressive revelation of the promise through hints, shadows, symbols, prophecies all making the promise clearer until in the fullness of time God revealed the promise in the flesh in the incarnation of His Son Jesus Christ.

Belgic Confession Article 18 announces how that promise was fulfilled.

This is the center point of the Bible. All the OT points forward to this, all the NT looks back to this, the coming of Jesus Christ into our world with bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

What a glorious blessing for all of us to live on this side of the revelation, that we aren't seeing so dimly as in a dense fog.

The Incarnation.

The incarnation is something we usually talk about at Christmas. But it's a truth in Scripture that should be in our hearts and on our minds much more than just once a year. This is the fulfillment of a centuries old promise. This is a pinnacle doctrine, a central truth.

No god had ever done anything like this ever before. All of heaven must have been absolutely stunned to watch this unfold. And then all of heaven burst into the most exalted praise ever heard. Suddenly all the hosts of heaven were praising God and singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to men."

It's the greatest thing God ever did. This is the biggest thing ever to happen in the history of the universe. This is over the top. The incarnation is the miracle of miracles and the wonder of wonders. We should be captivated by it every time and stand in awe at so marvelous a thing.

God decreed before creation to save the elect, and at the beginning of creation after the fall He announced that promise, and now at the climax of all history, what He promised to do, He now does.

In the fullness of time, meaning at the exact time appointed by God according to His perfect providence the promise was revealed. The seed of a woman, conceived by the Holy Spirit came into the world to crush Satan and destroy death.

God Himself who was before all things and the creator of all things, invisible, incomprehensible, the source of all life, the one in whose image we are made, took our image, shared our flesh. The one who gives riches became poor, the one who was full, emptied Himself, and descended from heavens glory to be born in a virgin's womb and walk in the dust of this earth.

Philippians 2:5-8.

In ever so brief an economy of words, Paul describes the greatest miracle of all time when Christ, the second person of the Trinity, condescended to be born as a baby, live as a servant and die the most ignominious death to provide mankind redemption.

Paul outlines Christ's descent from heaven to earth in *eight steps*:

He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped

Before the incarnation, Christ shared equal glory with the Father from all eternity. Christ voluntarily laid this aside for our sake.

Christ didn't renounce or forfeit His divinity but He concealed it for a season. He didn't lessen His glory, He concealed it with His flesh, taking the form of a man.

On the Mt. of Transfiguration that veil was pulled back for a brief moment for Peter, James and John to see. But they weren't allowed to speak of it until after the Ascension.

But emptied Himself

Emptied Himself of the brilliance of His divine glory
Emptied Himself of His independent divine authority, of His own independent will
Emptied Himself of the voluntary exercise of some of His divine attributes
Emptied Himself of His eternal riches and became poor for our sake
Emptied Himself of His unique intimate face-to-face relationship with His Father

Taking the form of a servant

He went from being Lord to being servant, from being master to being slave, from owning everything to owning nothing. He had no place to lay His head. He rode into Jerusalem on a borrowed donkey. When asked about taxes He had to ask for a coin. He claimed no rights.

Being born in the likeness of men

He took the likeness of man and was truly man, having the reality of our nature in every way except sin.

He wasn't a clone or a phantom or in disguise, He wasn't an angel or an alien, but a genuine man. He was recognized by others as a real man. So much so that all His enemies vehemently denied He was God and saw Him as the lowest form of human, a blasphemer.

And being found in human form

The Anabaptists in the days of the reformers rejected this. Article 18 gives an impressive list of Biblical proofs, every phrase a quote from Scripture:

Therefore we confess . . . that Christ shared the very flesh and blood of children;
being the fruit of the loins of David according to the flesh,
descended from David according to the flesh;
the fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary;
born of a woman;
the seed of David;
the root of Jesse;
descended from Judah, having descended from the Jews according to the flesh;
descended from Abraham— having assumed descent from Abraham and Sarah,
and was made like his brothers and sisters, yet without sin.

What about Jesus being born a man? Assuming it didn't what color His eyes or hair were or how tall He was, did it matter whether He was born as Mary's son or Mary's daughter? Could Jesus have been female? Was it a 50/50 deal, a flip of a coin?

Feminists say that Jesus was a man because the Bible was written by a bunch of male chauvinists, by a bunch of guys so deeply immersed in their patriarchal culture that they couldn't imagine another possibility. Some feminist depict the cross with a female Christ figure.

The new retranslation of the NIV shows an unwillingness to say Jesus had to be a man in I Corinthians 15:21:

NIV: For since death came through a *man*, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a *man*. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

TNIV: For since death came through a *human being*, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a *human being*. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

The Bible clearly reveals that the Messiah was male. We spent a lot of time with Genesis 3:15 last week which said the promised Savior would be human, from the seed of woman; and male, he will crush the serpent.

All the rest of the prophecies concerning the Messiah in the OT show him to be male. He is the eternal Son of the Father. He will be a prophet like Moses; he will reign forever on the throne of David as the Son of David; in the new covenant He will be the new and permanent High Priest; He will be the Second Adam standing as the federal head of the new and redeemed race.

In glory He will be the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is king, not queen, He is Lord, not lady, He is our brother, not our sister, He is the bridegroom, not the bride.

OT revelation makes it clear, and the NT confirms it. It is Biblically and theologically necessary for the Messiah to be male, to be the Son of God and the Son of Man. Any other teaching is heresy.

He humbled Himself

Christ humbled Himself by coming from the highest pinnacle of glory to the lowest depth of shame and dishonor. He lowered Himself to be mocked, falsely accused, spit on, hated, beaten, and killed.

By becoming obedient to the point of death

For us death is a necessity, for Christ death was a voluntary act of obedience. He did this out of love. He was obedient to the very end.

He who was Lord of life and death, became obedient even to the point of death. This is the most extreme humiliation. He was truly cursed.

Even death on a cross

This is the final descent from heaven to earth. From heaven to earth, from earth to the cross, from the cross to the grave. From glory to the curse, from the crown to the cross, from the throne to the tree, the most cruel, excruciatingly shameful, painful death there is; truly a curse.

This is the nature of the incarnation. It's not the idyllic Christmas card scene. It was an unfathomable condescension and degradation and humiliation. The only terms I can come up with to try to describe it for us in human terms is if one of us was to stoop to become incarnate as a cockroach. It's impossible with human words to explain what Christ did and the greatness of it.

Application and conclusion.

What is the practical importance of this doctrine? How does it help us, what is the comfort of this doctrine? So what?

First, God did the incarnation so that we would really know Him. Jesus reveals God to us. Jesus makes it possible for us to know our God.

In the incarnation we see the glory of God's grace, the glory of God's salvation, the glory of His forgiveness, the glory of His great love.

Second, the incarnation makes the salvation of our bodies and souls possible and makes eternal life possible for our bodies and souls. Jesus had a body and soul to redeem our bodies and soul.

Third, this great doctrine is a great comfort in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16 Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. 15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. 16 Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Fourth, this great doctrine has a practical application which Paul makes right before our Philippians text.

Philippians 2:3-5 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus,

Paul uses Christ's humility and humiliation as a model and motive for us to act likewise. Have this same attitude that Christ had. Follow His example of self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-giving, selfless love in submission to the will of the Father.

The servant is not greater than the master. Considering how far He humbled Himself; none of us will ever have to humble ourselves as far as Jesus did. We are called to follow Christ's example of humility. Whoever humbles Himself as Christ did, will be exalted as Christ was.