

GOLDEN CALVES, THE INCARNATION AND THE LORD'S SUPPER

TEXT: SELECTED SCRIPTURES

December 5, 2010

INTRO/REVIEW:

In Matthew 1:23, Matthew quoting the prophet Isaiah writes, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us).

Why "God with us?" Why did God become man? This morning, I want to briefly give you two reasons why it was necessary for God to become man.

LESSON:

- I. GOD BECAME MAN BECAUSE IN ETERNITY PAST GOD THE FATHER DEVOTED US TO HIMSELF.

In Ephesians 1:5, Paul writes, "In love He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will."

The carrying out of God's eternal decree necessitated God's own personal and physical entrance into time and space. The Incarnation was God's designed plan not man's. The whole plan of salvation originated in God's eternal wisdom and love.

It is God the Father who took the initiative and it is the God the Son who willingly came. Paul, in Galatians 1:4 says that Jesus "gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, *according to the will of our God and Father*," (emphasis mine).

Graham Goldsworthy writes, "The gospel is God's forethought, His blueprint to creation, not a mere afterthought because of sin," (*According to Plan*, p. 49). This means the Incarnation was part of God's forethought. The Incarnation was not a mere afterthought and neither did it originate in the mind of man.

When left to our own sinful imagination, we erect Golden Calves like the Israelites but not an Incarnate God. In the opening chapters of the *Institutes*, John Calvin begins his discussion of the knowledge of God by writing, "...all of us are inclined by nature (i.e., our fallen state) to hypocrisy, a kind of empty image of righteousness in place of righteousness itself abundantly satisfies us..." (1.1.2.).

Because of original sin (the result of the Fall; the corruption of man), the entire human race is given to all manner of empty speculation and vain imagination. In Romans 1:21-23 Paul writes,

²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

So, as soon as sin entered the world, idolatry entered, too. All false images of God originate in the fallen, darkened mind of man. Calvin writes,

...all degenerate from the true knowledge of Him...vanity joined with pride can be detected in the fact that, in seeking God, miserable men do not rise above themselves as they should, but measure Him by the yardstick of their own carnal stupidity...thus out of curiosity they fly off into empty speculations. They do not therefore apprehend God as He offers Himself, but imagine Him as they have fashioned Him in their own presumption (1.4.1).

Again, “Even though they are compelled to recognize some god, they strip him of glory by taking away his power...so they, by fashioning a dead and empty idol, are truly said to deny God,” (1.4.2.)

Thus, all men “continually depart from the true God and forsake Him, and, having left Him, you have nothing left except an accursed idol,” (1.4.3). Because of the Fall, “man’s nature...is a perpetual factory of idols,” (1.11.8.).

All images teach. It is a well-known fact that seeing a physical image will create or construct that same image in one’s mind. Large corporations understand the power of images. For example, in the North American market, the shape of the 2-liter bottle is straight-walled. So, in order to get an edge in the 2-liter market, Coke is now bringing back the original contour glass bottle shape that the company created in 1916.

And, it is a well-established truth from Scripture that all images produced in the fallen mind of man teach falsehood. Man-made images falsely represent God, as Calvin writes, “whatever men learn of God from images is futile, indeed false,” (1.11.5.).

The principal reason for the second commandment (the prohibition of any physical representation of God) is because Christ alone is “the image (εἰκὼν) of the invisible God,” (Col. 1:15).

Jesus is God’s final and fullest revelation (cf. Jn. 1:18; Heb. 1:1-3). The Word, who was God from eternity, took on human flesh (Jn. 1:14). And it is this Word Incarnate, John says, who has revealed and explained God to humanity, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, He has made Him known (ἐξηγήσατο-exposit/exegete)” (Jn. 1:18).

Were it not for the self-disclosure of God, we would never know anything about Him. Jesus is the Word, which conveys the notion of divine self-expression or speech (Jn. 1:1).

As the final and fullest self-expression of God, Jesus is revealed as a union of true God and true man in one person. Yet, because of the fallen nature of man, the self-evident, Incarnate Word of God, was not self-evident. In Matthew 16, Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” After listing some of the common answers (v. 14), Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” (v. 16). And then Jesus answered Peter, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven,” (v. 17). In other words, human understanding alone could not reveal to Peter that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God (Mt. 16:15-17). It is only through the Gospel, that the Holy Spirit conquers our idolatrous hearts and enables us to accept Christ as the God-Man as our Savior and to know God as our Father.

Our salvation (i.e., adoption as sons) finds its source in God the Father’s eternal decree. And the carrying out of this eternal decree made the Incarnation necessary. The Incarnation testifies of God’s self-disclosure through the Word, the God-Man rather than man’s self-discovery. The Incarnation is the solution to man’s idolatrous imagination. Because of the Father’s eternal decree, the One and Only, eternal Son, took upon Himself a complete human nature so that we might become adopted sons.

II. GOD BECAME MAN BECAUSE THE JUSTICE OF GOD REQUIRES THAT MAN, WHO HAS SINNED, MUST PAY FOR HIS SIN.

Question 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks: “Why must He (Jesus) be a true and righteous man?”

Here is the answer: “He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin. He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others” (Rom. 5:12, 15; 1 Cor. 15:21; Heb. 2:14-16; Heb. 7:26, 27; 1 Pet. 3:18).

It was necessary for Jesus to live as a 1st century Jew of Palestine so that as a sinless man (untainted by original sin), He might be able to merit and restore for us the righteousness and life, which we have lost.

If Jesus, the true Son of David, had to confess like King David, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me,” (Ps. 51:5), He would not have been able to effect salvation.

This is where we see the necessity of the Virgin Birth. The Incarnation of Christ was by the special work of the Holy Spirit who brought about His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The Virgin Birth was necessary because it was the means by which God broke the natural connection with sinful man. The Virgin Birth ensured that Jesus was untainted by original sin. It ensured that His humanity was perfect and thus able to accomplish the work of salvation.

Jesus was the perfect man who never committed sin (violated God's law). 1 Peter 2:22, "He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth." 1 John 3:5, "You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin."

Thus, in His manhood, Jesus was the truly perfect, Beloved Son. He lived every aspect of His life in a perfect relationship with God the Father. He fulfilled the Law in every respect. The author of Hebrews in speaking of Christ, writes, "⁵ Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for Me; ⁶ in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. ⁷ Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of Me in the scroll of the book,'" (10:5-7).

Without the Incarnation (God taking on human nature) Jesus could not have accomplished the work of our redemption. Not only His death but also His Incarnate life is necessary for our salvation. It was because Christ was devoted to God and to His Father's will throughout the entire course of His life that we are devoted to God in Him.

In Romans 5:12, 15, Paul says that Jesus carried us with Him just as Adam carried the entire human race in his disobedience. This is what Bible teachers refer to as the "active obedience of Christ." It is not sufficient for Christ to have merely died for our sins. This would only mean that we are no longer guilty. God's justice requires more than guiltlessness from man. His justice requires the fulfillment of righteousness. His justice doesn't except moral neutrality. It requires a positive righteousness.

Michael Horton writes,

When our Second Adam fasted instead of feasting and ignored the serpent's invitation to glory by interposing God's Word, His resistance to Satan was credited to us as if we were there with Him in the wilderness of temptation just as we were there with Adam in his disobedience. Every victory over doubt, temptation, despair, and compromise is credited to each believer. We are not only saved by Christ's death, but by His thirty-three years of perfect conformity to God's will in heart, soul, mind, and strength. This means that there really was and is only one truly devoted 'victorious Christian,' and He devotes us to God not by showing us how to imitate His devotion, but actually and objectively devotes us to His Father by imputing to us His obedience in life and in death," ("Heaven Came Down: The Mission of Christ," <http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org/etc/printer-friendly.asp?ID=506>).

And so the Incarnation, as Horton notes, "underscores the 'down' escalator thrust of the Gospel. The Incarnation testifies to us that God came down and became a perfect man in order to rescue sinners.

This is critical to grasp because when left to our own fallen desires, Paul says none of us seek after the true God (Rom. 3:11). Instead, we build towers of Babel (self-justification) in order to ascend to God on our own terms. We are constantly bombarded in our culture

with exhortations of “ascent” through finding peace through meditation, seeking greater heights of devotion, conference hopping in hopes of seeking the next inward ecstatic experience of God.

But, the central message of Christianity is not about our ascent to God. Rather, the central message of Christianity is about God’s descent to us. The central message of Christianity is not about “abandoning ourselves,” (David Platt, *Radical*, p. 7). The central message is about God’s abandonment of all the privileges that were rightly His as king of the universe (Philip. 2:6-8). The Son of God gave up His eternal privileges and became an ordinary Jewish baby bound for the cross. J.I. Packer writes, “The crucial significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in its place in the sequence of steps that led the Son of God to the cross of Calvary, and we do not understand it till we see it in this context,” (Knowing God, p. 58). The central message of Christianity is found in the descent of God in mercy; not the ascent of man in merit.

Thus, Michael Horton concludes, “It is Christ’s commitment-His devotion, His obedience, His fervor, His relationship with God-that secures our salvation. Because He is devoted to God and all that belongs to Him is devoted to God, we too belong to God and will never be devoted to destruction,” (“Heaven Came Down”).

The Christmas message is that Christ descended to us so that we might be brought into union with Him. As we have learned from Galatians 3:23-29, in our union with Christ we share everything with Him and He shares everything with us. His victory over temptation is our victory. His righteousness is our righteousness. His life is our life. His access to the Father is our access. His unique Sonship is the basis for our adopted sonship.

Noting the importance of our union with Christ, Martin Luther writes, “When one does not preach faith and does not let our incorporation in Christ and our becoming a branch in Him be the matter of first importance (Paramount!), all the world relies on its good works (i.e., relies on their ascent to God rather than God’s ascent to us),” (*What Luther Says*, p. 741).

The Good News of Christmas is that God has descended to come to us! It is in this way that “God with us” takes on even greater significance. God’s descent to man is Good News of great joy!

Luke 2:10-12, says, “¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

In God’s descent to you, through faith, this is who you will find, this is the sign:

You will find the eternal Son, through whom the world was created, who is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature, who upholds the universe by the word of His power, it is this eternal Son who became an ordinary Jewish baby bound for

the cross and destined to be raised in power, enthroned at the right hand of the Majesty on High and appointed heir of all things.

This is good news of great joy!

REFLECTION:

However, our problem is as Martin Luther wrote, “We are so weak that we more readily follow the feeling of sin and death than this laughter and joy of the Gospel,” (Martin Luther, *What Luther Says*, p. 740).

And so to confirm His favor toward us in order to sustain and strengthen the weakness of our faith and to help us enjoy the laughter and joy of the gospel, God not only announces good news to us through the preaching of the gospel but also attaches visible signs.

John Calvin writes, “We have determined, therefore, that sacraments are truly named the testimonies of God’s grace and are like seals of the good will that he feels toward us, which by attesting that good will to us, sustain, nourish, confirm, and increase our faith,” (*Institutes*, 4.14.7).

How then do we respond? Michael Horton counsels that, for now, while we find ourselves located between the first and second Coming of Christ, we must be content with the means of grace God has instituted for delivering Christ to us. The Holy Spirit, who is no less divine than the Son Himself, brings Christ to us through Word and sacrament.

Just as God concealed His glory and came to us in the physical humanity of His flesh, so He comes to us clothed in an announced Word of Good News and in the physical elements of water, bread, and wine.

It is here that God has promised to meet us. We don’t have to climb ladders to get to Him. All we have to do is come and sit at His table with faith where He has promised to come to us. It is here that our sin-laden, world-weary, conscience-afflicted, heart-doubting souls are comforted and assured with the very presence of Immanuel, God with Us.

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