

Have you noticed that everyone has an opinion about Jesus?

Some folks refer to Him as “a life coach,” or “the Man upstairs,” or “a prophet,” or “a guru,” or “a wise teacher,” or “a good man.” There’s a trendy T-shirt that reads, “Jesus is My Homeboy.”

Michael Gorbachev once referred to Jesus as “the first socialist.”

Psychologist Rollo May calls Jesus “a therapist for all humanity.”

The Lakota Indians named Jesus “the buffalo calf of God.”

Often you hear that all religions teach basically the same ideas. That couldn’t be further from the truth - *especially when it comes to Jesus...*

Islam refers to Jesus as a human prophet - inferior to Muhammad.

Bhuddism and the **Dalai Lama** see Jesus as “an enlightened being.”

New Agers speak of Jesus as “a higher state of consciousness...”

Hinduism says Jesus was just one of many divine manifestations.

Orthodox Judaism calls Jesus a magician and a blasphemer.

Unitarians believe Jesus is nothing more than a good example...

Jehovah Witnesses claim Jesus is an archangel – the creation of God.

Mormons teach Jesus is a man who became one of many gods. They believe Jesus was a polygamist and a half-brother to Lucifer.

I’ll let Billy Graham give the final opinion, “Jesus was not just another religious teacher, nor was He only another of a long line of individuals seeking spiritual truth. Jesus was, instead, truth itself. He was God Incarnate.” Jesus is not just a *good man*. Jesus is the **God-man**.

This is what all Christians believe, and this is what our **Essentials** series tackles this morning, **The Incarnation of God**. Here’s this morning’s statement of faith, “We believe Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Jesus Himself claimed to be God. Through the virgin birth God added humanity to His deity, without the curse of sin. God’s Incarnation spotlights His clarity, humility, bravery, and empathy.”

Everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but the big issue is what Jesus claimed about Himself! And there’s no doubt, **Jesus said He was God**.

Christianity’s critics like to suggest that *the deity of Jesus* is an invention of the Church. This is the thesis of Dan Brown’s hugely popular movie and novel, “**The Da Vinci Code**.” *Jesus was a mere man – with a wife and kid. Never in His wildest dreams did Jesus intend to be worshipped as God...* Yet that’s not the picture we glean from the Bible or from history.

Jesus was condemned to death not because of His pithy parables, or even His scathing rebuke of the religious leaders of His day. Jesus was executed for one reason - He claimed to be the one, true God.

Jesus made statements like, “**I am the bread come down from heaven**.” He didn’t say, “*I’m the bread come from Nazareth... or from Bethlehem (His birthplace)...*” Heaven, God’s domain, was Jesus’ home address.

Jesus’ favorite name for Himself was “**Son of Man**.” This was a Hebrew label for the Messiah. Daniel 7:13 says the *Son of Man* has dominion over all people and nations. He rules forever over a kingdom that’ll never end. For Jesus to be the “*Son of Man*” made Him more than mere human.

Jesus *worked miracles in His own name*, and *said He was sinless*, and *taught with absolute authority*, and *even forgave people’s sins...* and in Jewish culture these were all claims to deity.

When Jesus told the lame man, “Your sins are forgiven you.” The Pharisees were appalled. They whispered, “Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?” They knew the implications. Jesus claimed to be God. And it was difficult to argue with Him when He backed it up by healing the man’s paralysis.

Jesus also called Himself the “Son of God.” Actually, lots of people called Him by this name. Disciples, demons, the Devil, even a Roman Centurion recognized Jesus as “*the Son of God.*”

Here’s how this works from a Hebrew mindset... the son of a cow is a cow... the son of a man is a man... thus, the Son of God is God... For a Jew to be *Son of God* was to be God Himself.

John 3:16 takes it further. Jesus is “the only begotten Son of God.” The Jews also distinguished between “created” and “begotten.” Man was created by God. He is God’s image-bearer. Humans were created to reflect God’s image and likeness. *But Jesus is more...*

Jesus is not *created*, but *begotten*. Like a son, He possesses the nature of His Father. Hebrews 1:3 calls Him “the express image of God’s person.” He’s an exact imprint of God - not just *in shape*, but *in substance*. Jesus isn’t just a look-a-like. He doesn’t just reflect God, He is God in essence. As we’ll see in a moment, the Christian Creeds made a big deal out of Jesus not just being in the *form* of God, but being the same *substance*.

And, there were many occasions when Jesus came right out – made no bones about it - and said very matter-of-factly that He was God.

Once, He told the Pharisees that He had personally seen Abraham. They scoffed. How can a 30 year old claim to have seen a man who lived 2000 in the past. Jesus answered, “Before Abraham was, I am.” “I am” was the name for God given to Moses at the burning bush.

In John 10:30 Jesus said, “I and My Father are one.” And His audience knew what He meant. Verse 31 reads “The Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, “Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?” The Jews answered Him, saying, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” These people weren’t dense. Jesus was a man who claimed to be God.

Yet ever so often the History Channel runs a program that suggests Jesus never made such claims. They say His deity was a myth – an exaggeration promoted by Christendom long after His death. Supposedly, *the Jesus of the Church* is not *the Jesus of history*. That’s simply not true. The *Pseudo-History Channel* needs to get it right. The Church believes Jesus is God because He said He was.

In fact, Jesus is the only leader of a world religion to make such a claim. Bhudda, Krishna, and Muhammed never said they were divine. Jesus did – and we believe Jesus - that’s why we worship Him as God.

Fast-forward with me about 300 years from the time of Christ. It’s May 20, 325 AD, 300 Christian leaders have gathered together at Emperor Constantine’s lake house near the Turkish town of Nicaea. In your minds’ eye look around the room at the giants of the faith...

There’s a pastor from Egypt with one-eye. The Romans plucked it out of its socket when he refused to deny his loyalty to Jesus. Three men have ugly scars across their faces. A few of the pastors limp on one leg. Most everyone in the room has lost an arm, a hand, a finger, an ear. A lot of the pastors have burn marks from scalding hot oil. And there’s probably not a man in the room whose back isn’t a crisscross of scars.

These men have weathered decades of persecution. Members of their church were slaughtered by the gladiators and fed to the lions. Funerals were their frequent duty. They were constantly ducking Roman tribunals.

But recently a miracle occurred - the tide shifted. Emperor Constantine had converted. Christianity was now the state religion. Official hostility had ended. Overnight Christians had gone from *persecuted* to *privileged*. Christians were now praying in public - pastors teaching Bible Studies in the streets – suddenly, all of Rome was abuzz about Christianity.

Yet sadly, this new interest invited not only truth, but heresy to come out into the light of day. A man named Arius was teaching that Jesus was less than God - created by God. And this Arius was a gifted communicator. Folks liked to listen to him. He had little jingles to promote his errors.

Constantine wanted to put an end to the schism caused by Arius, so he hosted a church council near Nicaea, and brought together faithful men from around the empire – believers who had suffered for Jesus sake. These men endured persecution, but now in a time of peace they face a greater danger... And *these men* are not about to allow anyone to steal the truth for which they and their friends had sacrificed so much to protect.

The council of Nicaea didn't create new doctrine. It recognized what the NT had taught, the Church believed, and the saints died to maintain. The participants at Nicaea constructed a statement of faith that has endured the test of time. To this day all three branches of Christianity – Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant - adhere to the Nicene Creed.

Here's the statement the church fathers drew up, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of His Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."

And of the 300 bishops who attended the council only three refused to sign the creed... *Arius, and two of his buddies, were excommunicated.*

In fact, the Nicene Creed was so successful in supporting the deity of Jesus it didn't take long before people began to neglect His humanity. So the church met again, 125 years later, in 451 AD, at Chalcedon to draft another creed which further clarified the nature of Jesus.

Here's the Creed of Chalcedon, "Following the holy fathers (the earlier creed of Nicaea), we confess with one voice that the one and only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man... He is of one substance with the Father as God, He is also of one substance with us as man. He is like us in all things except sin."

This is a tremendous statement on the nature of the Son. Jesus is one person who is *fully God* and *fully man*.

This is the great mystery of Christianity – what the theologians call "the Incarnation of God." This word, "Incarnation" is an interesting term... In Latin, the word "incarne" means "in the flesh" or "in bodily form."

When you go to the market to buy chili you have two choices: *regular chili* or *chili con carne*... "Carne" and *incarnation* are the same word - *chili con carne is chili with meat*. And I hope you know your pastor always reaches for the manly chili – no sissy chili for me. I eat meaty chili. Well, Jesus was *God con carne* – *God in meat*.

The Bible teaches us God is Spirit. He is the Eternal Spirit, yet He was packaged in meat. He was given glands, bone, muscle, skin, teeth, hair...

At the Incarnation nothing was subtracted from Jesus' divinity – His deity was not diminished in anyway... but Jesus *added* to His nature. He added *humanity* to His *deity*.

Mormons teach Jesus was *a man who became God*. That's not true. Jesus was *God who became a man*. The Incarnation is not about an enlightened humanity graduating or rising to the level of deity. It's about a compassionate God diving into our mess.

It reminds me of a Decatur man and his friends who visited a barbeque house in North Georgia... They drove over an hour to get there. It was “[All you can eat rib night.](#)”

And it didn't take long for the mound of bones and dirty napkins to pile high. Long after they should have, the men admitted they'd had enough. They paid their bill and started to leave.

But the driver couldn't find his car keys... He checked his pockets... *nothing but lint*. He looked through the car window to see if the keys were still in the ignition... *nada*. Suddenly, it hit him. When he sat down to eat he had laid his keys on his tray. Evidently, they got covered with napkins, and were still on the tray when he emptied his trash into the wastebasket. The man's keys were at the bottom of *all you can eat rib night*.

It was a long walk home, and none of his friends wanted to hail a cab, so there was only one thing to do... *dive in!* And for the next fifteen, long agonizing minutes this man fished through *rib bones, half-eaten corn cobs, barbeque sauce, baked beans, slushy coleslaw, pools of back-washed tea, and gobs of saliva-soaked napkins...* until finally he grabbed his keys. When he pulled out his arm it was coated with a layer of BBQ slime.

This is what God did at His Incarnation. Jesus' humanity testified of His [humility](#). We were lost in a slime called “*sin*” - yet rather than cry for help, or drive home without us – Jesus dove into our filthy world to pull us out.

I say this with all due respect, I am thankful I serve a *dumpster diving God*. The Incarnate God *dove into the trash*. And here's **the key**... Jesus loves you and me. He doesn't leave us at the bottom of the can.

Nobody likes to stick their hand into a trash can of scraps, slobber, and spit. Your hand becomes vulnerable. *Along with a set of keys, who knows what else you'll find!* Likewise, Jesus' Incarnation made Him vulnerable.

Can you imagine the sheer [bravery](#) it took for Jesus to leave a blissful heaven and dive into the dumpster of a fallen world? GK Chesterton once wrote, “[Alone of all creeds, Christianity adds courage to the virtues of the Creator.](#)” Jesus didn't have to enter our madness - but He did!

We rehearse this every Christmas, but I wonder if we truly pay attention. A virgin conceives. It's a miracle. *The Spirit of God overshadows Mary's womb. The seed of the spiritual impregnates a human egg. The human and divine supernaturally mingle, and blend, and become one.*

Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise God made to Eve in Genesis 3:15. He's “[the seed of the woman](#)” who has crushed Satan's authority.

Jeremiah 31:22 also predicted Messiah's supernatural birth. “[The LORD has created a new thing in the earth – a woman shall encompass a man.](#)” One rabbi interpreted the verse, “[Messiah is to have no earthly father.](#)” Another rabbinical interpretation reads, “[The birth of Messiah will be like the dew of the Lord as drops on the ground without the action of a man.](#)” This is provocative... The OT predicted Messiah to be virgin born. And there were Jewish scholars living before Jesus' birth who agreed.

Note too, the virgin birth is not just predicted in the OT, it is absolutely crucial to NT doctrine. If Jesus was the bastard child of Mary's infidelity - or even the legitimate offspring of her marriage to Joseph – rather than be *God*, Jesus would be a mere mortal – just another guilty sinner. If Jesus is not God, He cannot be our Savior!

Biblically speaking, the human race inherits its spiritual nature from dad not mom. Romans 5, teaches that even though both Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden - we inherited the sin of Adam, not Eve. The sin of our distant daddy, Adam, makes us *wicked from the womb*.

But because of the virgin birth Jesus' dad was not Adam - but God! His humanity came from

Mary, but His spiritual nature came through the Holy Spirit. Jesus inherited *Mary's Jewish nose*, but *God's divine nature*. Jesus was born sinless. If He'd been born in sin - even if He'd lived a perfect life afterwards - He would've died for *His own sin*, not *our sin*. To die for us, Jesus had to be guiltless not only *from birth* but *in birth!*

This makes the virgin birth and deity of Jesus the underpinnings of all Christian theology. These are not optional doctrines. They're essentials. Kick out the cornerstones and the house caves in. Without the virgin birth, Jesus is not the *God-man*, but a *con-man*. Salvation is a sham.

In fact, much of the NT is aimed at defending the faith against a growing heresy called **Gnosticism**. "Gnostics" were early enemies of Christianity. The word "**gnosis**" is Greek for **knowledge**. These guys claimed to have insider info into God. They strutted around with a spiritual-superiority. And they threatened both the deity and humanity of Jesus.

Like most of today's cults, Gnosticism denied the uniqueness of Jesus. They believed God came in the form of pixie dust - and was sprinkled throughout the universe. They held to a practical pantheism. A little of God was in all things... *in holy men of ages past - in angels - in mountains - in animals - in plants - even in man...* Everything held a spark of the divine. God was sprinkled out across the vast universe. Thus, there was nothing special about Jesus. He was just one of God's many revelations... Jesus was *A* way to God, not *THE* way to God.

And the early church lined up against this heresy. Paul took aim at Gnosticism in Colossians 2:9, He says, "**In Him (Jesus) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily...**" God is no pixie dust. God is not sprinkled out. The totality of God resides in one human body. All of God - the Almighty, Eternal God who overflows all universes - is somehow compressed, capsulated, and contained in a tiny baby's body.

This is good news. It means God provides us great **clarity**. If you want to know God there's only one place you have to look... God placed all the eggs of revelation in one basket - *or better yet, in one manger!* All of God is found in Jesus. Everything God wants to say to man - everything He accomplishes for man - comes through Jesus!

The Apostle John also took a swipe at the Gnostics. Their heresy attacked Jesus' deity - but in other ways it denied His humanity. The Gnostics told stories of Jesus walking the beach yet leaving no foot prints. They taught the material world was innately evil, thus God couldn't have a physical body. This put Gnosticism at odds with Jesus' humanity.

And this is why John wrote in John 1:14, "**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...**" The Greek original puts it, "**The Logos became flesh.**" "**Logos**" was a technical term used by the Greek philosophers to define ultimate truth. The Greeks noticed an order and symmetry in nature. And they concluded there had to be a master plan - a kind of logic behind the natural universe - *a Logos behind the cosmos - a reason behind reality.*

The Greeks shared the philosophical quandary of the crazy man who said, "**Life must go on, / just forgot why!**" There had to be a master plan - a guiding purpose - *the philosophers just had no idea what it was.*

In fact, the Greeks made a mistake. They figured the Logos was an impersonal force - **the why** was **a what**. But John surprises his readers, **the why** is not **a what**, but **a Who**. John says, "**The Word became flesh...**" The Logos was human. The Unified Theory - the ultimate end-all - the answer to all questions, came as a child. The *Logos* played with *Legos!*

I like this paraphrase of verse 14, "**The Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood.**" *God in the hood... what does this look like?* Here's the picture: God walked our streets - ate our food - learned our customs - wore our clothes - spoke our language. God came in culture.

Unlike some of the movies you've seen about Jesus, He didn't have a big fat halo over His head. At night, He didn't glow in the dark. Jesus was **totally divine** - but equally so, He was

totally human. His feet swelled. His pits stunk. His bladder got full. *God even blew His nose.*

Jesus came across like a normal guy. He wasn't 10 feet tall - or excessively handsome – or the most muscular guy in the gym. Remember it cost the Temple cops 30 pieces of silver to buy Judas' help to identify Jesus. They couldn't even pick Him out of a crowd. Isaiah 53 records the Bible's only comment on Jesus' appearance, "When we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him."

Here's my point, the God who governed heaven, blended in on the streets of Nazareth... *For us to be like Him, He first became like us.*

Remember this when you try to reach your friends with the Gospel. There are stark differences between God and man, but the Incarnation emphasized the similarities. God ultimately reaches us with **empathy**. And that's probably how you'll lead other people to Jesus.

Philippians 2 describes the empathy of the Incarnation. Listen to verses 6-7 in the Phillips Translation, "(Jesus) who had always been God by nature, did not cling to His privileges as God's equal, but stripped himself of every advantage by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born a man..." Jesus never stopped being God, yet He laid aside God's attributes and advantages to empathize with the limitations you and I face every day.

As God, Jesus had all-knowledge. Yet on earth He asked questions and prayed for insight. He had all-power, yet He never flexed. Jesus got tired, weak, sleepy, stressed, tempted – yet He never took the short-cut. He refused to use His divine powers to navigate the challenges of life. He handled it as a man. Jesus was God with an arm tied behind His back.

It's like me playing ping-pong with my son Mack, I don't bust out my A-game and smoke him up. I pull it back – rein it in – I play on a lower level. My goal is to spend time with my son – love him, teach him – build trust and camaraderie – not deuce him up and humiliate him. This is how Jesus lived... He tempered His divinity to maximize His experience with us.

In OT times the Hebrews revered God. They quaked in fear before Him. But that's not all God wanted out of His relationship with His creation. God wanted us to *follow Him*, not just *fear Him*. He desired love and trust.

And God knew how it could be obtained... *rather than intimidate, why not entice - rather than herald judgment what about communicating your heart - rather than demand people's respect, why not work to earn their trust.* To capture hearts, God became familiar with hurt. *God invincible* chose to be vulnerable... and the humility and empathy of Jesus changed the world.

Here's a thought... sometimes you can be so right you become wrong. Many a man stands in the ivory tower of self-righteousness and expects everyone he's driven away – *his wife, his kids, his former friends* – to climb the steps and kiss his ring. He'll show love only after He gets his *respect*. And it's no different for the ladies: you're waiting on some R-E-S-P-E-C-T.

Thankfully, that was not God's approach. Jesus was as right as right can get. He was the rightness of God, yet without requiring anything from us He came down from the tower with reconciliation in His heart and initiated love. And if a righteous God can humble Himself... *I think you can too.*

Hebrews 10:5 records Jesus' words at His incarnation – the day He left heaven for earth... "When He came into the world, He said: "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me." When Jesus said His good-byes in heaven He knew what awaited Him on earth. He knew the wages of sin had always been death. Forgiveness and covenant had to be paid for in blood by a sacrifice.

For centuries Jesus gazed from His lofty perch in heaven, and watched Jewish priests take sharp knives and slit the throats of innocent lambs. And like a spring training game, Jesus had

the sense that it wasn't for real. It was just practice. It was leading up to something bigger and better.

The blood of bulls and lambs patched us up – it didn't *make us new*. A lamb earned a parole, but a permanent pardon required more - a sinless sacrifice. *So where in a fallen world does the Father go for a perfect sacrifice?* That's when the Son stepped up, "Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me." Jesus volunteered...

God is spirit, and spirit doesn't cut or bleed. This is why Jesus needed a body to fulfill His mission. From day one bleeding was in His future. Cold steel would pierce Jesus' fragile flesh. The Son of God was born to die.

Next week we'll examine the how and why of Jesus' crucifixion.

Today let's close by reciting our doctrinal statement, "We believe Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Jesus Himself claimed to be God. Through the virgin birth God added humanity to His deity, without the curse of sin. God's Incarnation spotlights His clarity, humility, bravery, and empathy."

BONUS MATERIAL:

One author writes, "The high and lofty One made low and helpless. The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell in time. The One, who none can look upon and live, is delivered in a stable under the soft, indifferent gaze of cattle. The Father of all mercies puts Himself at our mercy."

As in America, Christmas in Japan has become a huge commercial success – people shop and give gifts - yet few folks observe its religious significance. One Christmas an American reporter was in Tokyo doing people on the street interviews.

He asked one young woman, "What is the meaning of Christmas?"

She started laughing because she had no idea. When the interviewer pressed her for an answer, she said, "Isn't that the day Jesus died?"

Obviously, her answer revealed her ignorance - but in one sense the Japanese woman was exactly right. When Jesus left heaven He knew that one day cold, pointed nails would pierce the newborn flesh He occupied.

Jesus became a human to the same degree that you and I are humans.

Max Lucado describes in practical term what this meant... "God was given eyebrows, elbows, two kidneys, and a spleen. He stretched against the walls and floated in the amniotic fluids of his mother. *God came near...* Mary changed His diapers. The Almighty learned to walk. Children played in the street with Him. Jesus may have had pimples. He may have been tone-deaf. Perhaps a girl down the street had a crush on Him... It could be that His knees were bony. He felt weak. He grew weary... He was tempted... He got colds, burped, and had body odor. He snored, blew His nose, and hit His thumb with His hammer. His feelings got hurt. His feet got tired... His head ached. For thirty-three years He would feel everything you and I have ever felt."