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What is the Meaning of the Word Incarnation?

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What is the meaning of the word *incarnation*?

Here definitions from several theologians will prove helpful:

- The word *incarnation* means “in flesh” and denotes the act whereby the eternal Son of God took to Himself an additional nature, humanity, through the virgin birth. The result is that Christ remains forever unblemished deity, which He has had from eternity past; but He possesses true, sinless humanity in one Person forever (cf. John 1:14; Phil. 2:7-8; 1 Tim. 3:6).

The virgin birth was the *means* whereby the incarnation took place and guaranteed the sinlessness of the Son of God. (Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 222)

- In the context of Christian theology, the act whereby the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, without ceasing to be what He is, God the Son, took into union with Himself what He before that act did not possess, a human nature, “and so [He] was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person, forever.” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, P & R Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, NJ, Q. 21)

Scriptural support for this doctrine is replete, e.g. John 1:14; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:7-8; 1 Tim. 3:16; 1 John 4:2; 2 John 7 (cf. Also Eph. 2:15; Col. 1:21-22; 1 Peter 3:18; 4:1). (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1984, p. 555)

- This refers to the eternal Son of God’s being enfleshed as Jesus of Nazareth. It refers to the time when, in man’s “finest hour,” God the Son became man through the Virgin Mary and lived some 33 years in Palestine. It is the time when God (precisely, through the Son) pitched His tent among us (John 1:14); when Christ counted equality with God not something to be held onto, but humbled Himself, wore the form of a servant, and became obedient all the way to death on an ignominious Roman cross (Phil. 2:5-8).

In what C. H. Dodd called the “not-yet” times of the Old Testament, God had spoken to us in diverse ways through prophets, priests, and kings; and in the last time span, the last salvific age, God spoke to us through His only begotten, eternally generated Son (Heb. 1:1ff; John 1:18).

Incarnation means that God was not content simply to think good thoughts about us, or to help us while keeping a safe distance from us. It means that God visited us for our salvation—“in our sorry case,” as the ancient Athanasius expressed it. (*Beacon Dictionary of Theology*, Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, Missouri, 1983, p. 279)

The incarnation thus involved that amazing divine act whereby the omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient Son of God agreed to wrap around His eternal and invisible being flesh and bone and take upon Himself a human nature, thus becoming a fleshly bridge between the sovereign God and sinful men. In a nutshell, the incarnation became the *door* through which deity would enter the house of humanity!

Eugene Peterson aptly translates John 1:14 as follows: “The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” (*The Message*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 1993, p. 185)