



Christianity: The Basics — The Incarnation, Pt 2: Humanity's Way to God

[Christ's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1.3-4)

St Peter's striking words form part of the groundwork for how Christians would understand what our salvation means throughout the centuries. Salvation is not simply forgiveness of sins, or becoming better, more moral, or more generous people. Salvation is a death and a resurrection; "we have died", Scripture tells us, and now live in Christ (Col 3.3). Salvation is not about becoming better but about becoming entirely new, entering into a new way of existing, a new type of humanity; even, so Peter proclaims, a humanity which shares in divinity—which partakes of the divine nature.

This seems a bit ludicrous, maybe even dangerous. Talk of humans sharing in divinity seems strange, if not offensive, to our ears. Yet this is how Christians have spoken from the time of the earliest theologians: "God became human, that humanity might become divine", is the dictum that has rung out down through the centuries as the obvious conclusion of the Incarnation.

And it is only as the natural outflowing of the Incarnation that this kind of talk makes sense. It is by the "divine power granted to us", divine power entering into our humanity in Christ, that makes the 'partaking of the divine nature' possible. In other

words, the talk of humanity entering the divine life would be absolutely outrageous, had it not already happened.

In Christ, in the Incarnation, this divine gift is given to us: the perfect love of God is *gifted to our very humanity*. Perfect, divine, love, and perfect, divine, freedom, now exist within and have been lived out in our own human condition. The boundlessness of God embodied in human life. Perfect love and generosity, perfect power, now a human reality. So much so that our entire salvation, our entire Christian life, our entire human existence, can be summed up in the life of Jesus Christ.

Peter understood this. In the same chapter of his second letter where he speaks of us being partakers in the divine nature, he points to the transfiguration of Jesus—where Jesus was seen by Peter, James, and John to be glorified. The transfiguration of Jesus, where his humanity is seen in a glorified, heavenly state, shows us what it means for humanity to share in divinity—it demonstrates to us our human destiny and hope. In the Incarnation, then, God has not only descended to our human level, but our humanity is seen to ascend, to be glorified in Christ.

This helps us to see the Incarnation as the entire movement of Christ's existence. It is not simply a cute Christmas story, a single event in Bethlehem. Christ moves through the whole human drama. God the Son unites our humanity to himself, carries it through his perfect life, crucifies our old, broken, tattered humanity, and brings it through death into resurrected, glorified, transfigured, new life.

Christ is himself at once divine life spilling out over into human existence and humanity exalted into the divine life.

So this great mystery of the incarnation, that we were redeemed *by an insider*, that God has saved humanity from within humanity itself, is an invasion of our great hope into our every step, every breath, every thought and action — all of it — hope-filled spaces inhabited by timeless, endless, Love.

But this is just one side of the double movement of the Incarnation. The other side of the double movement being that not only did the divine enter humanity, but humanity is brought into the divine. And we see that because Christ has already lived out this reality, that this is more than some abstract, ethereal truth which doesn't really 'touch down' into the reality of our lives, but is indeed extremely practical. This union with God is a lived, *practiced, performed* reality in the Church.

This is why the New Testament so often uses the language of us being “in Christ” to speak of our salvation. In Christ, God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. In him we have redemption, forgiveness, an inheritance, a destiny — so we are told in the letter to the Ephesians (Eph 1.7-14). In Christ the reality of our salvation has already been realized: humanity has been exalted to enjoy the perfect love of God.



Giotto. *The Ascension*. Scrovegni Chapel, Padua.

This double movement of the incarnation, performed by Christ himself, is the centre of our hope. Our weakness, our frailty, our brokenness, our sin and shame, are manifestly not the truest things about us. Christ shows us that we have a future, a glorious hope; and the way to this hope has been cleared by Christ already, and in him, we are 'on the way', journeying toward, our true destiny—we are being stretched out towards our fullness in God.

A one-sided Incarnation: a downward movement only without ascent—God empathizing with our human condition, but leaving it where it is—would not save us. An empathetic humanizing of a God who simply begins to look a lot like us, would prove quite useless, even frustrating, in the actual lived reality of our lives, and certainly wouldn't bestow on us the glory of transfiguration. But Christ assuming our humanity, dying in it, rising to new life in it, and ascending with it, an upward return to the Father, carrying our assumed humanity with him — this is the *in-Christ-ness* which refuses to leave us where we are, which propels our raw, earthly existence into the divine perfection.

This double movement of the incarnation is the whole of human hope. Because in Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell (Col 1.19), as Paul reminds us, we now dwell with God. The incarnation is not only about God abiding with us, but about finding our home with and in God.

In Christ, God has come near; but he does not leave us where we are. He does not enter our utter weakness, the depths of our darkness, frailty, and limitation, just to sit alongside us within it. He pulls us out. The incarnation involves both descent and ascension, descending to the depths and rising to new heights: transforming what it means to be a human being through bringing us to God. To profess the incarnation is to believe in a God who is not distant and far-off, but inhabits our very flesh. And to profess the incarnation is to believe in a God who refuses to abandon us to ourselves, but unites us to himself, and moves us toward glory.

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Suggested Discussion Questions

1. What is the difference between wanting to be god-like and godly?
2. What does it mean to share in the divine life, which is the life of the Trinity? What does this—the meaning of our salvation—tell us about how to live now?
3. Christians insist that the Incarnation is not only a matter of divinity descending into creation, but—in the Ascension—creation (and perhaps humanity especially) being brought into the life of God. Does this change how we think about ourselves and the created order?