

## **ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE**

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### ***The Meaning of Christ's Incarnation***

For Christians, Christmas is about Incarnation—the Creator stooping to enter His creation. The Incarnation challenges the proposition that this is a purely physical and purposeless universe, inhabited by evolutionary accidents whose sense of self is probably illusive. The Incarnation also shatters myths about God: He is not distant and unreachable; He is not uncaring and unconcerned; He is not unmerciful and arbitrary. We thought we knew God, but the Incarnation proves us wrong. The Incarnation is about God revealing Himself in Jesus as the loving, compassionate, merciful, gracious Savior; the Creator is now forever identified with the creature. As someone once profoundly declared, “He who made humans was made a human.” The Incarnation declares that God cares. As pastor and theologian Tim Keller affirms, “He is so committed to our ultimate happiness that he was willing to plunge into the greatest depths of suffering himself.” For that reason, Christians always connect Christmas with Easter, for the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus provided the path to redemption. For the last 2,000 years, Jesus has been worshiped by Christians, as Redeemer, Savior and coming King. The often provocative 19<sup>th</sup>-century English essayist Charles Lamb and a group of literary Englishmen were one day speculating about how they would respond if imposing and gifted individuals from the past entered their room. Lamb declared: “If Shakespeare were to enter, we would rise to our feet in admiration; but if Jesus Christ were to enter, we would kneel and worship in adoration.”

How to respond to the Incarnation remains an important consideration, even today. Jesus has been called the “Great Divider.” His Incarnation is certainly central to how we divide history. For most of the ancient and medieval Mediterranean world, the founding of the mighty Rome was the reference point for determining years on the calendar. But, in attempting to settle the date for Easter, Dionysius Exiguus, a sixth-century monk, posited the B.C. (Before Christ)—A.D. (Anno Domini) system for numbering years, marking the birth of Jesus as the new reference point. The eighth-century Anglo-Saxon historian, the Venerable Bede, adopted this reference point, which was formalized during the reign of Charlemagne; it has enjoyed widespread acceptance ever since. Jesus is also the Great Divider in people’s lives. For Christians, the faith commitment to Jesus is usually a dividing point in their lives. Before Christ, there was darkness, uncertainty and little hope. After Christ, there is light, purpose and hope. Before Christ, God was over, above, beyond; but now He is Immanuel, God with us. For Christians, life takes on an enteral significance because of the Incarnation.

The Incarnation had an entirely unpredictable historical outcome. The arrogant, powerful Roman Empire that murdered Jesus only exists today as a series of archeological digs. But Jesus, born in that backwater town of Bethlehem and dying a lonely, horrific death, is today embraced by nearly 2 billion people as their Lord and Savior. Our culture's history, laws, music and art are inconceivable without the Incarnation. The Incarnation, then, is about the Lord of two worlds—the material and the spiritual—descending to live, for a season, by the rules of the one, so that He could resolve its dysfunction, disharmony and discord. The Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock, then, captures the essence of the Incarnation: “That God upon a throne should be an infant in a cradle; the thundering Creator be a weeping babe and a suffering man, are such expressions of mighty power, as well as condescending love, that they astonish men upon earth, and angels in heaven.” No wonder that a choir of innumerable angels broke out in rapturous, spontaneous song that Christmas morning, frightening a few shepherds, but also shaking the entire universe (Luke 2:13-14).

See Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (22 December 2013); Michael Gerson in the *Washington Post* (24 December 2013); Philip Yancey, *Rumors of Another World*, pp. 27-41.