

Chapter Three

WHERE DID THE CONCEPT COME FROM?

...The source of your unity and election is genuine suffering which you undergo by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God. Hence you deserve to be considered happy....you are imitators of God; and it was God's blood that stirred you up once more to do the sort of thing you do naturally and have now done to perfection.

—Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch

Within a hundred years, the concept of Jesus as God was already well established. Bishop Ignatius was the second bishop of Antioch. He was killed around 100 A.D. The above excerpt is from his letter to the Ephesians (*EARLY CHRISTIAN FATHERS*, C. C. Richardson, ed., Macmillan, 1970, pp. 87-88).

It is important to examine how and why the concept of Jesus as God developed and became accepted. That understanding helps us to assess our own beliefs. For that reason, this chapter will give you some historical and theological perspective on the development of this idea of Jesus as God incarnate. The concept developed very early, but it was not universally accepted among the vanguard of Christianity. There was great diversity among early Christians.

EARLY DIVERSITY

Even in the newborn church, immediately after Jesus' death, there were major differences among the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians. These are indicated in the New Testament book of Acts. During his journeys, Paul went to Jerusalem, where he met with James and the elders of the early church. In the next verses they are addressing him:

“You see brother, how many thousands of Jews have come to believe, all of them staunch defenders of the law. Yet they have been informed that you teach the Jews who live among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, to give up the circumcision of their children, and to renounce their customs. What are we to do about your coming, of which they are sure to hear? Please do as we tell you. There are four men among us who made a vow. Take them along with you and join with them in their rite of purification; pay the fee for the shaving of their heads. In that way, everyone will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, and that you follow the law yourself with

due observance. As for the Gentile converts, we sent them a letter with our decision that they were merely to avoid meat sacrificed to idols, blood, the flesh of strangled animals, and illicit sexual union.” Accordingly, Paul gathered the men together and went through the rite of purification with them the next day. Then he entered the temple precincts to give notice of the day when the period of purification would be over, at which time the offering was to be made for each of them.

[Acts 21:20-26]

This passage shows that the early Jewish Christians continued to follow Jewish law, circumcising their sons and keeping the traditions of their fathers. Some of them even continued to take the Nazarite vow, as the four men whose heads were being shaved. This Mosaic practice was one of dedicating oneself to God and following strict rules of purity and sacrifice for a specified length of time. (See Numbers 6:1-21.)

Gentile converts, on the other hand, often did not follow the same set of rules. It is apparent from the above verses that in the Jerusalem church they had only to abstain from forbidden meats and adultery.

Besides differing practices, there were also many different understandings within the early church concerning the true identity of Jesus. In fact, these differences were very marked, and are eloquently expressed by Robert L. Wilken in *THE MYTH OF CHRISTIAN BEGINNINGS* (Doubleday, 1971, pp. 165-166):

There were no set beliefs agreed on by all; nor were there any ground rules on how to determine what to say or think or do; nor was there any acknowledged authority for deciding such question (sic). Let us suppose that in the year A.D. 35 two men, Michael and Ephraim, became Christians in Jerusalem; Michael went to the town of Edessa in Syria to live, and Ephraim went to Alexandria in Egypt. On arrival in their respective cities, each told others about the remarkable man Jesus. After telling their friends about Jesus, let us say Michael and Ephraim organized Christian congregations. Almost immediately, problems would arise. What should we do about the Jewish law? What should we do when we gather for worship?... The questions were endless, and the Christians in Edessa and the Christians in Alexandria would not answer all in the same way—the traditions Michael and Ephraim brought with them were too embryonic, too undefined, to answer every new question or settle every dispute. They had to make up their own minds as they understood their own situation and the memories they brought with them.

Now let us change the scene to A.D. 75. Forty years have passed. In the meantime the Jews have been defeated by the Romans, and Jerusalem has been destroyed. Also, the Christian movement has spread widely and solidified its traditions. Let us now suppose that someone from Edessa travels to Alexandria and learns that there is a Christian community there.... To his surprise, he learns that they have little in common except a common loyalty to Jesus, and the fragments of his words that have been handed on orally. And even the fragments of his sayings are not in quite the form they are in Edessa. The visitor from Edessa discovers that the Christians in Alexandria do not keep the Jewish law, whereas his congregation keeps it exactly, admitting no one to the Christian community without circumcision. The Alexandrians

pray to Jesus, whereas in Edessa all prayers are addressed solely to God the Father.... Both are shocked at the practices and beliefs of the others.

Given this great diversity among early Christians, at what point did the doctrine of Jesus' divinity actually develop? And what were the factors contributing to the spread and eventual formalization of this doctrine?

Searching for the answers to these questions is especially difficult because there are no known surviving documents from the 'Mother Church', the original Christian community in Jerusalem. For an extensive discussion of this point, see S.G.F. Brandon's book *JESUS AND THE ZEALOTS* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967, pp. 148-159). We will review his arguments in a few pages.

But first, we need to look more closely at the differences that Paul had with other followers of Christ. Remember that Paul never met Jesus, nor did he study with the original apostles. His knowledge of Jesus and his teachings came mostly through personal inspiration. Hyam Maccoby states (*THE MYTHMAKER*. Harper and Row, 1987, pp. 3-4):

Paul claimed that his interpretations were not just his own invention, but had come to him by personal inspiration; he claimed that he had personal acquaintance with the resurrected Jesus, even though he had never met him during his lifetime. Such acquaintance, he claimed, gained through visions and transports, was actually superior to acquaintance with Jesus during his lifetime, when Jesus was much more reticent about his purposes.

Clearly Paul, however good his motivations, could not pass on to us the exact words or actions of Jesus during the years he taught on earth. He had no way of knowing exactly what they were.

It is inevitable that he would be in some conflict with those who were actually with Jesus during those years. Their experiences and their memories of a flesh and blood man would necessarily be different from the Jesus he knew from his visions.

PAUL vs THE SUPER-APOSTLES

There are many indications in Paul's letters that there were powerful and authoritative opponents to his teachings. Paul wrote that these opponents were teaching a "*gospel other than the gospel you accepted*" and preaching about "*another Jesus*:"

My fear is that, just as the serpent seduced Eve by his cunning, your thoughts may be corrupted and you may fall away from your sincere and complete devotion to Christ. I say this because when someone comes preaching another Jesus than the one we preached, or when you receive a different spirit than the one you have received, or a gospel other than the gospel you accepted, you seem to endure it quite well. I consider myself inferior to the "super-apostles" in nothing.

[2 Corinthians 11:3-5]

As Paul continues, it is clear that those whom he refers to above as the ‘*super-apostles*’ are Hebrews whose authority he does not question, but he tries to match their qualifications with his own: “*Since many are bragging about their human distinctions, I too will boast*” (2 Cor. 11:18).

Brandon argues that Paul’s ‘*super-apostles*’ are indeed the original Apostles of Jesus (Ibid., pp. 152-153):

Paul, curiously, despite his exceeding agitation over their activity, never names them. Whoever they were, they were obviously Christians of great authority or representative of leaders of great authority; for they were able to go among Paul’s own converts and successfully present a rival interpretation of the faith. Moreover, although he is so profoundly disturbed by their action, Paul never questions their authority as they did his. These facts, taken together with Paul’s very evident embarrassment about his relations with the leading Apostles at Jerusalem, point irresistibly to one conclusion only: that the ‘*other gospel*’, which opposes Paul’s own, was the interpretation of the nature and mission of Jesus propounded by the Jerusalem Church, which comprised the original Apostles of Jesus and eyewitnesses of his life.

Not all Biblical scholars agree that the ‘*super apostles*’ were the original apostles, and that the ‘*other gospel*’ was that of the Jerusalem Church, but there is a very good case for their being so. In fact, the very name ‘*super apostles*’ is evidence. Who else would fit such a name?

The passage we quoted earlier from Acts 21:20-26 demonstrates that the original apostles had differing views from Paul, and they had the authority to enforce those views, at least by writing to the Gentile converts to “*avoid meat sacrificed to idols, blood, the flesh of strangled animals, and illicit sexual union.*”

This is important because since Paul never met Jesus, he had no first hand knowledge of Christ’s teachings. Yet most of what we know about the very early years of Christianity comes from Paul’s letters. And the Gospel of Christ which has survived has come through the Pauline tradition. All of this means that we do not know for certain what the original followers of Jesus taught. And more importantly, we do not know how much of Christ’s own teaching has reached us unflavored by Paul’s understanding.

One thing we do know is that the differences among the early members of the church were deep and divisive. Paul’s letter to the Galatians makes that clear. Scathingly, Paul exhorts his readers to stick to the gospel he had delivered to them:

“I am amazed that you are so soon deserting him who called you in accord with his gracious design in Christ, and are going over to another gospel.... For if even we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel not in accord with the one we delivered to you, let a curse be upon him!”

[Galatians 1:6-8]

Obviously, whoever Paul's opponents were, they had authority that Paul felt he needed to counteract. This is shown by the fact that he goes on by defending his own authority, and then attacking those who apparently were preaching a return to Mosaic law:

"All who depend on observance of the law, on the other hand, are under a curse."

[Galatians 3:10]

In fact, the above verse shows that Paul actively fought against those who observed Mosaic law. This is reinforced by the following verses:

"I point out once more to all who receive circumcision that they are bound to the law in its entirety. Any of you who seek your justification in the law have severed yourselves from Christ and fallen from God's favor!"

[Galatians 5:3-4]

One of the strongest pieces of evidence that Paul's opponents were the original apostles comes in Galatians 2:6-14:

Those who were regarded as important, however (and it makes no difference to me how prominent they were-God plays no favorites), made me add nothing. On the contrary, recognizing that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised...those who were the acknowledged pillars, James, Cephas, and John, gave Barnabas and me the handclasp of fellowship, signifying that we should go to the Gentiles as they to the Jews.... When Cephas came to Antioch I directly withstood him, because he was clearly in the wrong. He had been taking his meals with the Gentiles before others came who were from James. But when they arrived he drew back to avoid trouble with those who were circumcised. The rest of the Jews joined in his dissembling, till even Barnabas was swept away by their pretense. As soon as I observed that they were not being straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I had this to say to Cephas in the presence of all: "If you who are a Jew are living according to Gentile ways rather than Jewish, by what logic do you force the Gentiles to adopt Jewish ways?"

[Galatians 2:6-14]

We see here that initially it was James, Cephas and John who recognized Paul's authority. What about the other Jerusalem apostles? Were they the important and prominent ones who wanted Paul to add to his teachings? If not, why were they not mentioned? And what was he supposed to add? It is logical that these opponents were original apostles, and that they wanted him to preach the following of Mosaic law.

Later, in Antioch, even Cephas had a run-in with Paul over the practice of Mosaic law. Paul accuses him and the other Jews of dissembling, and not being straightforward about the truth of the gospel and of wanting to force the Gentiles to accept Mosaic law. If Paul attacked even his supporters among the Jerusalem apostles, it is inevitable that he was at odds with them as a group.

Given the extremely strong prohibition of idol worship in any form, which is at the base of Mosaic law, it is almost certain that any tendency to deify Jesus would have been strongly resisted by the Jerusalem apostles. This could well have been the basic cause of the rift between Paul and the original apostles.

Brandon argues (*Ibid.*, p. 154):

According to Paul's own testimony, his 'gospel' was repudiated and his authority as apostle was rejected by his opponents. This the leaders of the Jerusalem Church could effectively do, because Paul had never been an original disciple of Jesus, nor had he learned the faith from them. However, the irony of the situation, from our point of view, is that it is Paul's 'gospel' that has survived and is known to us from his own writings, whereas the 'gospel' of the Jerusalem Christians can only be reconstructed from what may be inferred from Paul's references to it and what may be culled, also by inference from the Gospels and Acts. This apparent triumph of Paul's version of the faith is surely to be traced to the Jewish overthrow in A.D. 70....

That final sentence is of great importance. Brandon draws a parallel between the esoteric Jewish community at Qumran whose books were hidden before the community was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 68. Those documents are now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the community which authored them is known almost solely through them. Recently those very scrolls have been made available to scholars at large, stirring great hopes for break throughs in our understanding of Judaism at the time of Christ and thus, early Christian development.

Brandon proposes that the Christian community in Jerusalem, which strongly maintained its ties to Judaism, was also wiped out by the Romans in A.D. 70, and its documents lost, as a repercussion of the Jewish uprising there.

The annihilation of the Mother Church of Jerusalem meant that the original leaders of Jewish-Christianity were killed or dispersed. Also, there must have been a strong political force encouraging the moving away from Judaism and any traditions which identified a community as being tied to Judaism. These factors would have greatly aided in the strengthening and spread of non-Jewish concepts among early Christians. They would have especially helped the spread of the concept of Jesus' deification.

THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE: THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION

Let us diverge now from the historical aspects of this discussion and examine some of the theological aspects. The whole doctrine of Jesus' divinity has been thoroughly examined in *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE* (Ed. J. Hick, Westminster Press, 1977). This

important books is not readily available now. Therefore, I have quoted extensively from it.

One look at the list of Christian scholars who contributed to this collection shows that it is not a radical fringe among today's theologians who reject this doctrine of incarnation, rather it is a growing number of careful and highly qualified theologians:

Don Cupitt: University Lecturer in Divinity and Dean of Emmanuel College, Cambridge (UK)

.Michael Goulder: Staff Tutor in Theology in the Department of Extramural Studies at Birmingham University.

John Hick: H. G. Wood Professor of Theology at Birmingham University.

Leslie Houlden: Principal of Ripon College, Cuddesdon. Dennis Nineham: Warden of Keble College, Oxford.

Maurice Wiles: Regius Professor of Divinity and Canon of Christ Church of England's Doctrine Commission

.Frances Young: Lecturer in New Testament Studies at Birmingham University.

From the Preface of *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE* (Ibid., p. ix):

The writers of this book are convinced that another major theological development is called for in this last part of the twentieth century. The need arises from growing knowledge of Christian origins, and involves a recognition that Jesus was (as he is presented in Acts 2.21) 'a man approved by God' for a special role within the divine purpose, and that the later conception of him as God incarnate, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity living a human life, is a mythological or poetic way of expressing his significance for us. This recognition is called for in the interests of truth....For Christianity can only remain honestly believable by being continuously open to the truth.

In the same book (Ibid., p. 4), Maurice Wiles writes:

Negative generalizations are notoriously dangerous claims to make. Nevertheless, it seems to me that throughout the long history of attempts to present a reasoned account of Christ as both fully human and fully divine, the church has never succeeded in offering a consistent or convincing picture.

Mr. Wiles, who is canon of Christ Church, goes on to urge that "Christianity without incarnation" should be regarded as a positive and constructive idea, rather than negative and destructive. He points out that the worship of Christ, "traditional throughout the whole of Christian history," is "idolatrous in character."

Some three centuries after Jesus' death, culminating with the Nicene Conference of 325 A.D., a politically motivated church solidified the doctrine of 'God Incarnate.'

In *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE* (Ibid., p. 17), Francis Young makes an interesting and critical observation, pointing out that the focus of the Gospels is quite different from that of Jesus' own teachings:

The epistles of Paul — and indeed the speeches of Acts — reveal that the early Christian gospel was about Jesus Christ. This makes it the more likely that the gospels correctly report that the message of Jesus was different—it was about the kingdom of God.... There are difficulties in tracing explicit Messianic claims back to Jesus himself. Apart from John where interpretative material is clearly placed upon the lips of Jesus, the gospels invariably portray not Jesus but others as using phrases like the 'Holy One of God', or 'Son of David', or 'Son of God'.... Furthermore, Mark's gospel conveys the impression that Jesus attempted to keep his identity as Messiah a secret divulged only to his inner circle. This 'Messianic secret' motif in Mark remains an unsolved problem, especially since it appears sometimes to be introduced rather artificially; yet it adds to the impression that Jesus may well have preferred to remain enigmatic, in the interests of directing his hearers away from false enthusiasm for himself, to the consequences of the coming of God's kingdom for their lives here and now.

Young goes farther, arguing that Paul never claimed Jesus was God (Ibid., p. 20-22). Whether Paul himself believed Jesus to be God, or not, it was the Pauline tradition which eventually developed the doctrine of God incarnate, culminating with its formal doctrinal statement in the Nicene Creed.

In *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE* Michael Goulder and Frances Young present a number of plausible theories dealing with the development of incarnational belief in the early church. They both agree that the roots of incarnation and of the divinity of men extend to the pre-Christian and pagan cultures.

We know that the concept of 'son of God' was quite different for Jews following Mosaic law and Romans whose religious mythology specifically referred to divine children of the gods. Young points out that both Jewish and Greco-Roman traditions have the idea of the ascent of exceptional men into heaven, and of heavenly beings—either angels or gods—coming to earth to help men. It is not an impossible step from those traditions to the belief that God Himself had to come to earth to save mankind.

Don Cupitt, Dean of Emmanuel College at Cambridge concluded that the incarnational doctrine no longer belongs to the essence of Christianity, "but only to a certain period of church history, now ended" (Ibid., p. 134).

Cupitt also narrates that the Eastern theologian John of Damascus (about A.D. 675-749), in defending iconolatry, admitted the fact that neither the Trinity nor the *homoousion* [identifying Jesus as God] nor the two natures of Christ can be found in the scriptures. John of Damascus then continued, "but we know those doctrines are true."

After he acknowledged that icons, the Trinity and the incarnation are innovations, John of Damascus went on to urge his readers to hold fast to them "as venerable traditions delivered to us by the fathers." Thus, at least 14 centuries ago, he recognized that the incarnation doctrine is not a divinely revealed doctrine, delivered to us by Jesus, but a human idea passed down to us "by the fathers."

Don Cupitt adds that John of Damascus was not the only theologian to use this argument. Theodore the Studite (about A.D. 795-826) adopted it too. Cupitt then states that this “brings out an odd feature of Christianity, its mutability and the speed with which innovations [such as the incarnational doctrine] come to be vested with religious solemnity to such an extent that anyone who questions them finds himself regarded as the dangerous innovator and heretic.”

Cupitt emphasizes that the idea of God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ is in direct contradiction with the teachings of Jesus. He points out (Ibid., p. 138):

...The Bible contains (Ex. 20.4) a categorical prohibition, not merely of any kind of image of God, but of any naturalistic or representational art, a prohibition which has influenced Jews and Muslims to this day. Nothing other than God can be an adequate image of God, and God himself, being transcendent, cannot be delineated. Early Christianity inherited and followed this rule. Old Testament arguments against idolatry, pagan arguments and early Christian arguments ran closely parallel.

The distortion the doctrine of God incarnate causes is well stated in Cupitt’s conclusion (Ibid., p. 140):

The assertion that deity itself and humanity are permanently united in the one person of the incarnate Lord suggests an ultimate synthesis, a conjunction and continuity between things divine and things of this world.... This idea distorts Jesus’ ironic perception of disjunction between the things of God and the things of men, a disjunction particularly enforced in the parables.... Whether he is seen as an apocalyptic prophet or as a witty rabbi (or, as I think, both), what matters in Jesus’ message is his sense of the abrupt juxtaposition of two opposed orders of things.... But the doctrine of the incarnation unified things which Jesus had kept in ironic contrast with each other, and so weakened the ability to appreciate his way of speaking, and the distinctive values he stood for.

John Hick, H. G. Wood Professor of Theology at Birmingham University, compares the exaltation of Jesus to the status of God with the deification of Buddha in Buddhism. He blames the innovation of the incarnation doctrine on a human tendency to elevate the founder of any given religion. He states (Ibid., p.170):

Buddhology and christology developed in comparable ways. The human Gautama came to be thought of as the incarnation of a transcendent, pre-existent Buddha as the human Jesus came to be thought of as the incarnation of the pre-existent Logos or divine Son. And in the Mahayana the transcendent Buddha is one with the Absolute as in Christianity the eternal Son is one with God the Father.... We are seeing at work a tendency of the religious mind which is also to be seen within the history of Christianity. The exaltation of the founder has of course taken characteristically different forms in the two religions. But in each case it led the developing traditions to speak of him in terms which he himself did not use, and to understand him by means of a complex of beliefs which was only gradually formed by later generations of his followers.

Each essay in *THE MYTH OF GOD INCARNATE* is a careful piece of honest scholarship and soul searching commentary. Such work requires the moral courage to step out of one’s upbringing, indeed, out of one’s culture, and allow the objective examination of one’s own faith. The unanimous conclusion of these courageous theologians is that the

concept of God incarnate is indeed innovation and not part of the teachings of Jesus Christ.

The results of this innovation are clearly and eloquently summarized by Don Cupitt (Ibid., pp. 142, 143, 145):

If in Jesus the fullness of God himself is permanently incarnate, Jesus can be directly worshipped as God without risk of error or blasphemy. A cult of Christ as distinct from a cult of God then becomes defensible, and did in fact develop. The practice of praying direct to Christ in the Liturgy, as distinct from praying to God through Christ...slowly spread, against a good deal of opposition, eventually to produce Christocentric piety and theology. An example of the consequent paganization of Christianity was the agreement to constitute the World Council of Churches upon the doctrinal basis of 'acknowledgement of our Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour'—and nothing else. Perhaps it was only when Christocentric religion finally toppled over into the absurdity of 'Christian Atheism' that some Christians began to realize that Feuerbach might have been right after all; a Chalcedonian christology could be a remote ancestor of modern unbelief, by beginning the process of shifting the focus of devotion from God to man.... Similarly, it could not resist the giving of the title *Theotokos*, Mother of God, to Mary. The phrase 'Mother of God' is *prima facie* blasphemous, but it has had a very long run, and the orthodox have actively promoted its use, fatally attracted by its very provocativeness.

....It is my contention that the doctrine of Christ as God's divine son has here humanized deity to an intolerable degree. The strangeness of it is seldom noticed even to this day. A sensitive theologian like Austin Farrer can dwell eloquently upon a medieval icon of the Trinity, and a philosopher as gifted as Wittgensten can discuss Michelangelo's painting of God in the Sistine Chapel, and in neither case is it noticed that there could be people to whom such pagan anthropomorphism is abhorrent, because it signifies a 'decline of religion' in the only sense that really matters, namely, a serious corruption of faith in God.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that there was great diversity in the beliefs of early Christians. The understanding that Jesus was God comes to us from one line of those early believers, those who followed Paul. Paul himself never met Jesus, and his views differed radically from the original apostles who did know Jesus and followed his example directly. The destruction of the original Christian community in Jerusalem allowed Paul's understanding to overshadow that of the original followers of Jesus.

From a theological point of view we have seen that there were many possible factors contributing to the development of the doctrine of God incarnate. The influence of pagan belief undoubtedly played a part, as did the natural human tendency to exalt the founder of any religion. We also see that there are highly qualified Christian scholars who reject the concept outright, and offer very convincing arguments for doing so.