

The Birth of God

William Lane Craig

SUMMARY

Does it make sense to say that Christmas marks the birth of God? This question evokes the primary theological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries – how Jesus Christ can be considered both human and divine. Below, Dr. Craig offers his understanding of how Jesus' divine and human natures join together in a single person, how His human frailties and experiences were deep and meaningful, and how one can cogently hold to celebrating "the birth of God" at Christmastime.

THE BIRTH OF GOD

Tonight I've been asked to speak on "The Birth of God." The title is jarring because it seems unintelligible. How can God, the uncreated Creator of all things, have a birth? How can a being which is self-existent and eternal, the Creator of time and space, be born? It doesn't seem to make any sense.

And yet at Christmas this is, in a way, precisely what Christians celebrate. The Christian doctrine of the incarnation states that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. Jesus was thus truly God as well as truly man. He was born of the virgin Mary; that is to say, Jesus had a *supernatural* conception but a perfectly *natural* birth. Since Jesus was God in the flesh, his mother Mary is therefore called in the early Christian creeds "the Mother of God," or the "God-bearer." This isn't because God somehow came into existence as a result of Mary's conceiving or that Mary somehow procreated God. Rather Mary could be called the God-bearer because the person she bore in her womb and gave birth to was divine. Thus, Jesus' birth in this sense was the birth of God.

But that only pushes the problem back a notch. For how *can* Jesus be both God and man, as Christians believe? If anything appears to be a contradiction, surely this is it! For the properties of being divine and the properties of being human seem to be mutually exclusive, to shut each other out. God is self-existent, necessary, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present, and so on. But human beings are created, dependent, time-bound, and limited in power, knowledge, and space. So how can one person be both human and divine?

Birth of God – The Bible describes Jesus as both human and divine

Now in case the Christian hard-pressed by this question is tempted to avoid the problem simply by

denying that Jesus was really divine or denying that he was really human, let me say that the Bible doesn't leave that option open to us. The New Testament affirms both the deity and the humanity of Jesus Christ and so *forces* the problem upon us. Take, for example, the opening chapter of John's gospel. The gospels of Matthew and Luke open with the story of Jesus' supernatural conception and virgin birth; but John's gospel takes a more cosmic perspective, in which he describes the incarnation of the pre-existent Word of God. He writes,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. . . .

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

Here John describes Jesus as "God," the Creator of all things, who became flesh and entered human history about 2,000 years ago in the land of Judea. Thus, the implication is inescapable, as well as the problem it poses: Jesus was both human and divine.

As succeeding generations in the early church struggled to understand the doctrine of the incarnation, some people resolved this apparent contradiction only at the expense of denying one or the other pole of the biblical teaching. Groups such as the Gnostics or the Docetists, for example, denied that Christ was truly human. He merely *appeared* to take on human form; the flesh of Christ was merely an illusion or a disguise, and his supposed sufferings merely apparent. On the other hand, groups like the Adoptionists or the Eutychians denied instead the true divinity of Christ. Jesus of Nazareth was just a mortal man whom God adopted as His Son and assumed into heaven. In opposition to these groups on the left and on the right, the early church repeatedly condemned as heretical any denial of either Christ's humanity *or* his deity. However contradictory or mysterious it might seem, theologians staunchly stood by the biblical affirmation that Jesus Christ was truly God and truly man.

Birth of God – The debate over the nature of Christ

In time there eventually emerged in the early church two centers of theological debate about the incarnation, one in the city of Alexandria in Egypt and the other in the city of Antioch in Syria. Both schools of thought were united in affirming that Jesus Christ was both human and divine; but each offered a different way of understanding the incarnation. Let me try to explain them because these views will serve as a springboard for my own proposal later on.

Both the Alexandrian and the Antiochean theologians presupposed that things have natures, that is to say, essential properties which determine what *kind* of thing something is. For example, a horse has a different nature than a pig, and both of these are different from a human nature. According to the great Greek philosopher Aristotle the nature of a human being is to be a rational animal. This meant that a human being is essentially composed of a rational soul and a physical body. This understanding of human nature was accepted by the theologians of both Alexandria and Antioch alike. Moreover, God, on this view, also has a nature, which includes such properties as being self-existent, eternal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and so forth.

Now the dispute between Alexandria and Antioch basically boiled down to this: did Jesus Christ have one nature or two natures? The theologians of Alexandria argued that the incarnate Christ had one nature which was a blend of divine and human properties. One of the most ingenious proposals to come out of this school was offered by the bishop Apollinarius, who died about A.D.

390. Apollinarius proposed that in the incarnation God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, took on a human body, so that Jesus Christ had a human body but a divine mind or soul. God thus came to experience the world through a human body and to suffer in this body, while remaining sinless and infallible in His person. Christ thus had a divine-human nature and so was both God and man.

The Antiochean theologians attacked Apollinarius' view on two grounds. *First*, they argued that on Apollinarius' view Christ did not have a complete human nature. He only had a human body. But his soul was divine. Being truly human involves having both a human body and soul. What distinguishes man from the animals is his rational soul, not his physical body. The Antiochean theologians therefore charged that on Apollinarius' view the incarnation amounts to God's becoming an animal, not a man. Their *second* objection was related to the first. Since the purpose of the incarnation was the salvation of humanity, if Christ did not truly become a man, then salvation was nullified. The whole rationale behind the incarnation was that by becoming one of us and identifying with his fellow-men Christ could offer his sinless life to God as a sacrificial offering on our behalf. On the cross Jesus Christ was our substitute; he bore the penalty of sin that we deserved. Jesus is thus the Savior of all who place their trust in him. But if Christ was not truly human, then he could not serve as our representative before God, and his suffering was null and void, and there is no salvation. By denying Christ's full humanity, Apollinarius undermined salvation through Christ. For these reasons in the year 377 Apollinarius' view was condemned as heretical. The question which remains, I think, is whether Apollinarius' view is totally bankrupt or whether it did not contain a valuable kernel of truth which is still salvageable.

What alternative, then, did the Antiochean theologians have to offer? In contrast to Alexandria, the theologians of Antioch insisted that in the incarnation Christ had two complete natures, one human and one divine. They held that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, in some sense indwelt the human being Jesus from the moment of his conception in Mary's womb. One prominent bishop of the Antiochean school named Nestorius therefore objected to Mary's being called "the God-bearer" because what she bore was the human nature of Christ, not God. Christ's human nature included both a human body and soul, which were somehow assumed or possessed by God the Son.

The problem with the Antiochean view in the minds of its Alexandrian opponents was that it seemed to imply that there were two persons in Christ. First, there's the divine person, the second person of the Trinity, who existed prior to Mary's miraculous conception. Second, there's the

human person who was conceived and borne by Mary. So you seem to have two persons, one human and one divine! Think of it this way: a human person is constituted by a body and a soul. So if Jesus had a complete human nature, including a human body and a human soul, why wouldn't there be a human person, who began to exist at the moment of his conception and who was then indwelt by God the Son? But in that case you don't have a real incarnation, all you have is just a human being indwelt by God. The hapless Nestorius was therefore branded by his critics as destroying the unity of Christ's person, and so his view was condemned as heretical in 431.

Birth of God – Two complete natures in one person

So what was to be done? In order to settle the dispute between Antioch and Alexandria an ecumenical council was convened at Chalcedon in the year 451. The statement issued by the Council is a profound and careful delineation of the channel markers for an orthodox doctrine of the incarnation. It seeks to affirm what is correct in *both* schools' views while condemning where they go wrong. Basically, the statement affirms with Antioch the *diversity* of Christ's natures but with Alexandria the *unity* of his person: *one* person having *two* natures. Let me read for you the Council's statement.

We. . . confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhood and also perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhood, and consubstantial with us according to the manhood, like us in all things except sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhood, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the manhood, one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-Begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not divided or separated into two Persons, but one and the same Son and only begotten God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

So according to this statement, Christ is one person with two natures, human and divine. The twin errors to be avoided are dividing the person and confusing the natures. The natures are distinct and complete, and the person is one in number.

Now notice that the Council's statement does not presume to explain *how* one person can have two natures, one human and one divine. That's left to further theological debate. But what the

Council insisted on is that if we're to have a biblical doctrine of the incarnation, we must neither fracture Christ's person into two persons nor blend his two natures into one nature.

So the question is: can this be done? Can a logically coherent and biblically faithful account of the incarnation be constructed? Many would deem this an impossible task. The incarnation is a doctrine that you either reject as a contradiction or accept as a mystery. I disagree. I think that a logically coherent and biblically faithful account of the incarnation can be constructed. And that is what I propose to outline briefly for you now. I'll develop it in three steps.

Birth of God – Rationality is shared by both Christ's natures

Step 1: *Affirm with the Council of Chalcedon that Christ is one person who has two natures.* The incarnation should not be thought of as God's turning Himself into a human being. The incarnation is totally unlike stories in ancient mythology of the gods' turning themselves into men or animals for a time and then reverting to being gods again. Christ was not *first* God, *then* a human being, *then* God again. Rather he was God and man simultaneously. The incarnation was therefore not a matter of *subtraction*—of God's giving up certain attributes in order to become a man. Rather the incarnation is a matter of *addition*—of God's taking on in addition to the divine nature He already had another, distinct nature as well, a human nature, so that in the incarnation God the Son came to have two natures, one divine, which he had always had from eternity, and one human, which began at the moment of its conception in Mary's womb. Thus, he had all the properties of divinity and all the properties of humanity.

The question is: how can one person have two natures like this? That leads me to my second step.

Step 2: *Affirm with Apollinarius that the soul of Jesus Christ was God the Son.* What Apollinarius rightly saw was that the best way to avoid the Nestorian fallacy of having two persons in Christ is to postulate some common constituent shared by his human nature and his divine nature, so that these two natures overlap, so to speak. On Apollinarius' proposal that common constituent was the soul of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, Apollinarius apparently didn't think that Christ possessed a complete human nature, which, as his critics rightly saw, undermined Christ's humanity and his saving work.

But are these shortcomings of Apollinarius' view irremediable? I don't think so. Recall what human nature is: to be human is to be a rational animal. Since God doesn't have a body, He does not have an animal nature. But God *is* the ultimate rational mind. Therefore God the Son already

possessed prior to his incarnation rationality and personhood. Therefore, in taking on a human body God the Son brought to the physical body of Christ precisely those properties which would elevate it from a mere animal nature to a complete human nature, composed of body and rational soul. The human nature of Christ cannot even exist independently of its union with God the Son; there would just be a corpse or a zombie. The humanity of Christ comes into being precisely through the union of God the Son with his flesh. Thus, Christ *does* have two complete natures after all: a divine nature, which pre-existed from eternity, and a human nature, which came into being in Mary's womb in virtue of the union of God the Son with the flesh.

This reformulation nullifies the traditional objections to Apollinarianism. For, first, Christ *does* have on this view two complete natures, divine and human, including a rational soul and a body. Second, as a result Christ is truly human, and so his death on our behalf is valid. Notice that Christ is not *merely* human, since he was also divine, but he was nevertheless *truly* human and so could stand as our proxy before God, bearing our punishment so that we might be freed.

So far so good! Still, the proposal is not yet adequate. For if the soul of Jesus Christ was God the Son, how can we make sense of the biblical portrait of Jesus as someone having an authentic human consciousness, developing from infancy to manhood? Doesn't my proposal imply that Jesus was like some kind of superman, not susceptible to human limitations? That leads to my third step.

Step 3: *Affirm that the divine aspects of Jesus' personality were largely subliminal during his earthly life.* I suggest that the superhuman elements of Jesus' person were mainly subconscious. This suggestion draws upon the insight of depth psychology that there's much more to a person's consciousness than what he is aware of. The whole project of psychoanalysis rests on the fact that some of our behavior is rooted in deep springs of which we are only dimly aware, if at all. Think of a person suffering from multiple personality disorder. Here we have a very striking example of the eruption of subliminal facets of an individual's mind into distinct conscious personalities. In some cases there's even a dominant personality who is aware of all the others and who knows what each of them knows but who remains by unknown by them. Hypnotism also furnishes a vivid demonstration of the reality of the subliminal. As Charles Harris explains, a person under hypnosis may be told certain facts and then instructed to forget them when he "awakens," but, writes Harris, ". . . the knowledge is truly in his mind, and shows itself in unmistakable ways, especially by causing him to perform . . . certain actions, which, but for the possession of this knowledge, he would not have performed" Many of you may have seen

very amusing incidents of this phenomenon featured on the TV Guide channel, like a young man's being hypnotized to think that a tree is a beautiful girl to whom he wants to propose marriage. Harris goes on to say,

What is still more extraordinary, a sensitive hypnotic subject may be made both to see and not to see the same object at the same moment. For example, he may be told not to see a lamp-post, whereupon he becomes (in the ordinary sense) quite unable to see it. Nevertheless, he does see it, because he avoids it and cannot be induced to precipitate himself against it.

Similarly, during his earthly incarnation God the Son allowed only those facets of His person to be part of Jesus' waking consciousness which were compatible with typical human experience, while the bulk of His knowledge, like an iceberg beneath the water's surface, lay submerged in his subconscious. On the theory I'm proposing Christ is thus one person, but in that person conscious and subconscious elements are differentiated in a theologically significant way. Unlike Nestorianism my proposal does not imply that there are two persons, anymore than the conscious aspects of your mind and the subconscious aspects of your mind constitute two persons.

Birth of God – A satisfying account of Jesus as human and divine

Such a theory provides a satisfying account of Jesus as we see him portrayed in the gospels. In His conscious experience, Jesus grew in knowledge and wisdom, just as a human child does. One doesn't have the monstrosity of the baby Jesus lying in the manger all the while contemplating the infinitesimal calculus. Possessing a typical human consciousness, Jesus had to struggle against fear, weakness, and temptation in order to align his will with the will of his Heavenly Father. In his conscious experience, Jesus was genuinely tempted, even though he is, in fact, incapable of sin. The enticements of sin were really felt and couldn't be blown away like smoke; resisting temptation required spiritual discipline and moral resoluteness on Jesus' part. In his waking consciousness, Jesus was actually ignorant of certain facts, though kept from error and often supernaturally illumined by the divine subliminal. Even though God the Son possesses all knowledge about the world from quantum mechanics to auto mechanics, there's no reason to think that Jesus of Nazareth would have been able, without recourse to the divine subliminal, to answer questions about such subjects, so low had He stooped in condescending to take on the human condition. Moreover, in His conscious life, Jesus experienced the whole gamut of human anxieties and felt physical hurt and fatigue. My proposal also preserves the integrity and sincerity of Jesus' prayer life, and it explains why Jesus was capable of being perfected through suffering. He, like

us, needed to be dependent upon his Father moment by moment in order to live victoriously in a fallen world and to carry out successfully the mission which the Father had given him. The agonies in the Garden of Gethsemane were not mere play-acting but represented the genuine struggle of the incarnate Son in His waking consciousness. All the traditional objections against the God the Son's being the mind of Christ melt away before this understanding of the Incarnation, for here we have a Jesus who is not only divine but truly shares the human condition as well.

So is my proposed theory of the incarnation true? I think we can only say: God knows! It would be presumptuous for me to claim otherwise. But what I *do* claim is that the theory is both logically coherent and biblically faithful and is therefore possibly true. And if it is possibly true, that removes any objection to the incarnation based on the claim that it's a contradiction to say that Jesus Christ was both truly God and truly man.

But the theory does more than that, I think. It also serves to elicit praise to God for His self-emptying act of condescension in taking on our human condition with all its pains and struggles and limitations for our sake and for our salvation. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, that by his poverty we might become rich" (2 Cor. 8.9). This is what we celebrate at Christmas. In the words of the great hymn writer Charles Wesley:

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see!
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with men to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel!
Hark! The herald angels sing,
"Glory to the new-born King!"