

CRAIG HAMILTON

Made Man



Why God becoming human is so **shocking**,
so **necessary** and so **life-changing**

We rely on Jesus for our salvation, but who is he?

We say he is fully God and fully man... but what does that actually mean? How does it work? Why does he need to be both? Does it matter?

We miss a rich vein of gold when we mentally file the incarnation under 'too hard'. In his word, God beautifully expresses why the Word became flesh, and our Christian forebears worked long and hard to explain this mystery clearly. Now, in this warm and accessible book, Craig Hamilton takes us through the incarnation in a way that enables every Christian to understand what it means and why it matters that God became man.

Craig Hamilton is a graduate of Moore Theological College, and oversees leadership development, small groups, integration, children, youth and young adults ministries at a suburban church in Sydney. Most of his time is spent preaching sermons and coaching leaders. He is also the author of 'Wisdom in Leadership'.



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so **necessary** and so **life-changing**

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matthiasmedia

SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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To Mark Stephens, for showing me
not just that theology is important
but also that it can be cool.

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The Jesus of Ricky Bobby

In the 2006 movie *Talladega Nights*, Ricky Bobby (played by Will Ferrell) leads his family in saying grace at the dinner table, praying to “eight pound six ounce newborn infant Jesus”. When his wife complains about him praying to a baby, he responds, “I like the Christmas Jesus best and I’m saying grace. When you say grace you can say it to grown up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.”

His teammate and best friend interrupts: “I like to picture Jesus in a tuxedo t-shirt because it says, like, I want to be formal but I’m here to party too. Because I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party.”

This absurd scene perfectly captures many people’s thoughts when it comes to Jesus: they want Jesus to be the way *they* want him to be. Jesus is a contradiction anyway—God *and* man???—so why shouldn’t I focus on my favourite bits? But rather than shrugging our shoulders at the confusion of it all, or picking who we want our Jesus to be, in this book we’ll look at the Jesus given to us in the Scriptures, while also drawing on the wisdom and reflection of centuries of Christians, in order to clarify how and why he is both God and man, the one we need rather than who we think we want.

I didn’t always see Jesus this way. I thought there was only confusing Jesus and boring Jesus. But I remember sit-

ting in my bedroom in the western suburbs of Sydney, reading the Gospel of Mark and realizing that all of it was *true*. I remember the moment where Jesus went from loser to Lord, from being boring and lame to impressive and interesting. Once that switch was flicked it just snowballed. The more I learned the more impressive he was, and the more I began to understand the more interesting it all became.

But there were always lots of pieces I didn't understand, and the more I understood the more I began to understand how much I didn't understand. And nowhere was that more apparent than when it came to the incarnation.

The total of my understanding on the incarnation, even up until the fourth and final year of theological college, was 100% man and 100% God. That's not meant as a criticism of the college or my church. They may have *taught* me much more but I just never learned it—and, um, I didn't really go to lectures that often (to my loss). But there's so much more we can know and say about the incarnation than this! Fully man and fully God is a good place to start but it's a sad place to end.

What we're talking about is the infinite and almighty Lord God of Hosts who became a baby (possibly 8 pounds 6 ounces), helpless and dependent just like any baby is. He needed to be fed, burped, wiped, changed, taught how to talk and walk and do mathematics and be a carpenter. It's all seriously offensive, and if it's not offensive to us it's probably because we haven't thought about it seriously enough.

Why it matters

The incarnation is important to think about because worship is an engine fuelled by truth. We marvel and awe at

that which is worthy of our adoration. The more we know of God—who he is and what he has done—the more we can worship him. Of course, this doesn't mean that the more we know the more we will worship. It's certainly possible for those who know only a little to worship and adore far more than those who know much. But this doesn't make ignorance a virtue; it simply means that for those who know much, much will be required. But the more we know and understand of what God has revealed to us, the more firepower there will be to energize our worship of the God who has done such jaw-dropping things.

Another reason why this is important is because the incarnation is complicated and hard to articulate, which makes it easy to accidentally get wrong. You can believe and teach heretical positions without even knowing you're outside the bounds of orthodoxy.

That's a big problem, not least because doctrines are connected to each other. It's tempting to think of the Trinity, sin, creation, atonement, incarnation, etc. as separate books on a bookshelf, where we can take one book out and replace it with another without disrupting the rest. If we change our doctrine of sin, can't we just take that book off the shelf and put a different book of sin in? But you can't mix and match doctrines because they're not individual units. Doctrine is more like a web than a bookcase, and so when you pull on one thread it moves all the others. If one doctrine is malformed and out of its proper position then it pulls all the other doctrines out of shape and place too.

This dynamic means that a doctrine of the incarnation that is weak or malformed will impact other doctrines too; the most likely possibilities being the doctrines of the

Trinity, atonement, humanity or creation, along with the behaviours and conduct that flow from those convictions.

Why this book

I wanted to read a book that put the key biblical pieces for the incarnation, the historical theology stuff, and what Jesus' incarnation actually *does* all together in one place, in a way that I could actually survive reading it. And since I couldn't find that book, I decided to write it myself.

But it took me a while. From my reading of the Scriptures and time thinking theologically about it all, it seemed that the cross wasn't all there was to the redemption Jesus purchased for us. Redemption began in the life of Jesus before the cross, in the incarnation in fact, and then culminated in the cross and resurrection. But this seemed like a new thought and not something I'd ever been taught before.

So I was apprehensive, since novelty is almost always heresy. But then, as I kept reading the classic works of theology, I discovered that this idea wasn't original after all, but was instead one of the oldest and most consistent teachings about the incarnation that existed, from the early church fathers to the Reformers to modern reformed evangelical theologians. It was a thought like buried treasure, once well-known but seemingly forgotten.

In the end, I want this book to help us remember what we already knew.

Coming up

We're going to dive into the Old and New Testaments as we look at what the Bible actually has to say about all this: about what led up to the incarnation of Jesus, the virgin birth and Jesus' life as a man, as well as how the biblical authors thought and talked about Jesus' incarnation.

We'll also retrace some of the early centuries of theological reflection as church leaders tried to understand what the Bible said. We'll see that while there were people who were right and wrong—faithful to the Bible and unfaithful—motives were often mixed, and good outcomes were sometimes achieved through less-than-good means. There were good people trying to get it right but instead got it very wrong. So we'll dig down into the mess and ambiguity of history and follow some of that story.

Then in the third section we'll put the theological pieces together as we consider what the incarnation actually does and achieves. What is the incarnation *for*? How does the incarnation of Jesus relate to the death of Jesus? What does it mean that the atonement is a culmination? If Jesus is a fully divine person and a fully human person, does that mean he's two people? Does he have two wills? What happened to his human body after he ascended back to heaven? How does God actually be a human anyway?

Let's get started!

The puzzle and the mystery

He's unique

For a guy born in relative poverty in the backwaters of the Middle East who only lived until his mid-thirties, never had an army, and was executed by his enemies, Jesus has done pretty well for himself.

Even people who don't think much of him have to agree that when it comes to impact over millennia, Jesus' name belongs in the top five people of all time. When you want to make a list of people who are known globally and who have literally changed the world, we're talking rarefied air. We're talking names like Alexander the Great, Buddha, Julius Caesar, Muhammad, Colonel Sanders.

One of the strategies guys like this often employed was to name everything around them after themselves, so that their fame would live on after they died. Alexander the Great founded the Egyptian city of Alexandria, and bestowed his name on 70-odd other locations. When Alexander, Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus and Muhammed died, their reputations were enormous—they had put in a lot of effort to make it so.

When Jesus died, however, his reputation wasn't enormous and nothing was named after him; if anything he died in obscurity, and his tiny little movement in the back-

waters of Whocaresville looked as though it had utterly failed and collapsed.

Yet Jesus' influence on the world didn't wane after his death. It exploded. A thousand years after his death his legacy had set the foundation for most of Europe, and now more than 2000 years on he has more followers in more places than ever before.

Many extraordinary claims are made about Jesus and his impact on our world. The idea of human rights is tied back to him. Hospitals are credited as the invention of the followers of Jesus. Universal education, universities, humility and charity being seen as virtues rather than vices—these are all attributed to Jesus and his followers. Even our concept of cemeteries today is tied back to Jesus: the word 'cemetery' comes from the Greek word that means 'sleeping place'—waiting for the resurrection. As Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, the name of Jesus was “not so much written as ploughed into the history of the world”.¹

Among the claims that Christianity makes about Jesus of Nazareth, one of the most outrageous is that this first-century man was, in actual fact, God himself entering his creation. Which of course then means that God dies in his creation on a cross. How can this be right? How are we to understand it? And what does it mean? Jesus is a puzzle.

This is one of the central questions of Christianity: Is Jesus the man also God himself? And if he is, then in what sense is he God? Is he God pretending to be a human—divinity in disguise, like a Transformer pretending to be a car? Or is he a man who was so holy and so connected to

1 Speech at Harvard Divinity College, 15 July 1838.

God that when he died, he became a god in some way? Or perhaps he's a demi-God? Or maybe part-man and part-God? This is the puzzle and the mystery.

These are all possible explanations; and yet the claim of Christianity, from its very earliest days, is that Jesus is 100% human and 100% divine, and that he is 100% both at the same time. It's called 'the incarnation'. The doctrine of the incarnation is the claim that when God set out to rescue his rebellious creation, he did it by entering into that creation himself as a human without compromising his divinity in any way.

Español

I recently ate chilli con carne for the first time. I'd first heard of it in *The Simpsons*, where Homer eats a crazy chilli and then hallucinates himself through a relatively unfunny episode. *Chilli con carne* is Spanish for 'chilli with meat'. The Spanish word *carne* comes from the same Latin word that we've built the word *incarnation* around. When we're talking about the incarnation, that's what we're talking about: God with meat. The Word become flesh. While there's lots to say about what that means and doesn't mean, this is the centre of it: God himself, who has existed for all eternity past as spirit and so without a physical body, in the incarnation has become meat.

Too-hard basket

The incarnation is a notoriously difficult subject. It's philosophical, nuanced, fraught with challenge, and loaded with technical terminology. This means it's also an intimidating

subject—if not as intimidating as the Trinity, then at least a photo finish for second place. Along with being difficult and intimidating, the subject of the incarnation can also seem overly abstract and academic. Discussing it can seem like intellectual pontificating, full of sound and fury and yet maybe meaningless to daily life.

The Trinity

The first reason the incarnation is so challenging to understand is that when you think about the incarnation, you're not just thinking about the incarnation; you also need to think about the Trinity and the atonement at the same time. This means, for those who are paying attention, that you have to think about perhaps the most intimidating doctrine—the Trinity—at *the same time as* thinking about perhaps the second most intimidating doctrine—the incarnation—at *the same time as* thinking about maybe the third most intimidating doctrine—the work of redemption and reconciliation, the atonement. To focus in on the incarnation and see it clearly you also need to zoom out and look at the Trinity and the atonement as well, seeing all three at once. When you try to focus in on just the incarnation, you actually can't do it. So in talking about the incarnation we're also not *just* talking about the incarnation.

The Trinity in particular is a topic that will always be in view throughout this book, and we'll be coming back to it again and again, so I want to highlight some of its challenges here at the outset.

Perhaps the most fundamental thing to say about God is that he is One. The Bible is at great pains to emphasize this. Christianity, and the Judaism that it grew out from, are two

of the great monotheistic faiths in the world. Whatever else we say about God, we say that he is One. We don't believe in three gods—that's tritheism. There is a single divine essence or substance, a fundamental unity to God.

All monotheisms would come with us up to this point: God is one. Christianity, however, has more to say. As well as God revealing himself as one, this single divine essence is revealed as three distinct persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—but they are not three separate gods. They are one God in three persons. They aren't three subsequent manifestations of the same God, as though he is the Father, then he is the Son, then he is the Spirit. All three are eternal; all three are infinite in power and dignity; all three are fully God. It's not that the Father is a third of God, the Son another third, the Spirit the final third, and together they are God. This isn't how the Bible talks about it.

Their relationships with each other are what distinguish them from each other. The Son is everything the Father is, except for being Father. The Father is everything the Son is, except he's not Son. The Spirit is everything the Father and Son are, except for being Father or Son. Each person of the Trinity is wholly and fully God, but we don't have three gods. They are distinct but not separate, and they are who they are in and by their relationships with each other.

Sometimes people will object that the doctrine of the Trinity is ridiculous because it's contradictory: one cannot be three. If you have three you have three; if you have one you have one; but when you have three what you don't have—and what you can't have—is one. This is generally correct, and it would be correct when we talk about

the Trinity if we were saying that God is one person and three persons; or if we said that he is one divine essence and three divine essences. But Christianity doesn't make those claims about the Trinity. Christianity says that God is one *essence* in three *persons*, which is not contradictory. It's mysterious, it stretches the bounds of our language and our ability to conceptualize, but it's not contradictory.

The Trinity is at the heart of the Christian faith, and Christians in the first four centuries worked very hard to describe what had been revealed and protect it against error and misunderstanding. What did it mean when Jesus said, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9)? Or "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30)? Or "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58)? What does it mean to say that the Word who became flesh both *was* God and was *with* God while also affirming that the Lord our God is one? The doctrine of the Trinity is the result of brilliant Christian minds discussing and trying to resolve disagreement on what the Bible actually says and how that holds together. This doctrine isn't the product of melding the Bible with Greek philosophical categories and seeing what comes out, nor is it the speculative prattling of bishops with too much time on their hands. It's the result of understanding what the Bible says and how it's coherent.

When we discuss the incarnation, strictly speaking we're talking about the second person of the Trinity, the Son, becoming human. The person of Jesus of Nazareth is the person of the eternal Son of God. This means that when we talk about Jesus, if we're not talking about the second person of the Trinity made flesh, then we're not actually talking about Jesus. The person of the Son has taken on a

human nature and brought humanity into the Godhead. This is another way of saying that talk of the incarnation is automatically talk of the Trinity; God the Father sends the Son to be born of the virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit. When we talk about the Trinity we're talking about the one God in three persons; when we talk about the incarnation we're focusing in on one of those divine persons, the Son, and thinking about his becoming human for us and for our salvation.

There is so much more that could be said on the Trinity, but the danger is that this would turn into a book about the Trinity rather than a book about the incarnation with the Trinity always in view. If you'd like to continue learning about the Trinity, there are lots of great books you can chase down to help you.²

More than a moment

The second reason the incarnation is such a difficult doctrine is that when we talk of the incarnation it can sometimes sound like what we're talking about is a particular moment in time: the moment when God the Son took on human nature. There was the Word, and he was with God and he was God, and he was with God in the beginning. Then the moment comes when the Word becomes flesh, becomes meat, and that moment is the incarnation. Then comes the life of Jesus, then his death, resurrection and ascension.

2 E.g. Andrew Moody's *In Light of the Son*, Robert Letham's *The Holy Trinity*, BA Ware's *Father, Son & Holy Spirit*, Sam Allberry's *Connected*, TF Torrance's *Trinitarian Faith*.

But that's not quite right. The incarnation isn't just a description of the miraculous and mysterious moment when the eternal Word takes on human flesh. The incarnation is the second person of the Trinity becoming *and being* human. The incarnation is the entirety of Jesus' earthly life, from his conception and birth through to his death and resurrection and then continuing into his resurrected life on into eternity. The incarnation isn't just about the split-second moment when he becomes a human. The Word became *and will continue to be* flesh for the rest of forever. For his whole earthly life he was—and he now always will be—huggable, handshakeable and high-fiveable. Although the incarnation can sometimes seem like a single moment, it's actually not. The incarnation is about who Jesus is, his being man and God, and what that means. It's more than a moment.

Incarnational dictionary

The third reason the incarnation is so difficult is that, over the centuries, the fact of the incarnation has become surrounded by a menagerie of theological terms that can suck the life out of the entire conversation. It's as though these technical terms have attached themselves like barnacles to the ship of the incarnation and are threatening to sink the whole thing before we even make it out of the harbour. What makes it worse is that lots of these terms are Greek or Latin words that have been 'Englishified'. We're talking terms like *hypostasis*, *hypostatic union*, Apollinarianism, Docetism, Eutychianism and a whole bunch of other 'isms'.

These words and phrases are massively important for grasping what is actually going on in the incarnation as

well as what isn't going on. We need them, and later on we'll get clear on what they mean, but if we're not careful they can get in the way and make us feel as if we're dissecting and observing a dead specimen rather than appreciating and experiencing something stunningly alive.

One of my favourite things to do is play toy cars with my son. The best part is when the cars crash into each other. One way to understand what's happening in those moments is to translate the action into a physics equation about mass and velocity, what's known as the law of the conservation of momentum. It would look something like this:

$$M_1 \Delta v_1 = -m_2 \Delta v_2$$

Looks fun, doesn't it? A small handful of people can look at that equation and see the action and activity clear as day. For them, that algebraic equation helps break down what is actually happening. But for the rest of us, it looks like the place where enjoyment has gone to die. Left as an equation it's lifeless and kind of boring. It misses a lot of information, capturing nothing of the excitement and fun. That all needs to be translated back out of algebra into real life again, into the dynamism of a father and a son enjoying time spent playing cars together.

Terms like *hypostatic union* and Nestorianism are like theological algebra. They help us break down what is happening and what isn't happening when it comes to the incarnation. They help us get inside it and see a bit more clearly what is related to what. But we need to make sure we keep translating the 'algebra' back into the real, dynamic and breathtaking event of God himself entering into humanity for us and for our salvation.

We'll work hard to grasp these technical terms, but knowing and being able to use them isn't the point. Those words are just a means to an end. They're tools to help us grasp, appreciate and be impressed by the actual thing that happened: the incarnation itself.

The big deal

The incarnation is certainly one of the most astounding components of what Christians believe. Let's describe it again in its simplest terms: the God who created everything entered into his creation and participated in it, without himself losing any of his deity, to redeem and reconcile that creation to himself. JI Packer, in his famous book *Knowing God*, says:

The supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us... lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man... The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation.³

Because it's so astounding, the incarnation is a point in Christianity where we can easily falter. It's one of the main stumbling blocks for Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims and many others. Paradoxically, it clears the road through much of the other challenging terrain in the Christian

3 JI Packer, *Knowing God*, 2nd edn, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2005, p. 58.

message. How can the death of one man bring salvation to so many? How can a guy just walk around doing impossible things like calming storms and walking on water? If that man was God himself in the flesh then those apparent issues evaporate. Once you acknowledge the idea that he was God with meat then it makes sense that he would be capable of doing things that aren't humanly possible, like healing people and raising them back to life. It makes sense that the immortal God himself would rise to life. It makes sense that his death would have the power to save many people. All of that becomes plausible when the incarnation is understood properly and put in its proper place in the theological mix.

What I'm saying is that the incarnation is a big deal. Over the course of this book we'll look at it from a number of different angles, and you'll see that the more we think about it, the more staggering it is. But here's the main thing that makes the incarnation a big deal: salvation itself hangs on the incarnation. If Jesus was not both completely God and at the same time completely human then salvation would not have been possible. The incarnation isn't about metaphysical puzzles, philosophical challenges, and deep thoughts to chew over. The incarnation is about salvation.

When we think about salvation we tend to think about the cross—which is understandable because when the Bible writers talk about salvation, most of the time they talk about the cross. But they don't *only* talk about the cross; they also talk about the resurrection and the incarnation. Jesus' crucifixion is not the start and end of his work of salvation. His earthly work of salvation unquestionably climaxes in the cross and resurrection, but it starts in the incarnation.

The incarnation is necessary because you need to be born before you can die; but the incarnation is more than that. The incarnation is necessary because Jesus needs to be fully God and fully man for his death for us to be effective; but it's more than that too. The incarnation isn't just the prerequisite for redemption; it's not the entrée to the main course of crucifixion. Our redemption *begins* with the incarnation. Or as John Calvin puts it, "from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us".⁴

It's not just Calvin who talks like this—along with many other theologians across the centuries, the Bible itself speaks about the incarnation playing a part in redemption. We'll explore this later.

The person and work of Christ

But hang on a second. This idea that salvation begins with the incarnation can be quite foreign to us. It's normal to talk about Jesus' atoning death but it seems strange to talk about Jesus' atoning birth or his atoning life. It might even feel weird to speak of his atoning resurrection. One of the major sound bites for thinking about Jesus rightly, that we'll return to over and over again, is that the work of Christ must not be separated from the person of Christ. You might think, "Well, of course. The person has to do the work. You can't separate them." A picture is painted and it is painted by someone. The person and work go together. But that's not all it means.

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.16.5.

Like we said above, it also means that the incarnation, the person of Jesus, is more than just the set-up for the work of the cross, the platform on which the work is done. The person and work of Christ are actually one big event, and looking at each is like looking at a different perspective. The work of Jesus isn't just being done by the person of Jesus: the work of Jesus is being done in the person of Jesus—the person of the eternal Son of God made meat. The cross isn't the totality of the work of Jesus. When you've explained the cross and resurrection of Jesus, you haven't fully explained his work of salvation. You've explained the climax of his work but you might have accidentally separated his work from his person. Salvation is focused on and climaxes in the cross, but it starts in the world in the incarnation.

It's not that every time you talk about Jesus you have to make sure you say everything, as though you're somehow not allowed to talk about his death without also saying “by the way the divine Word added human nature to his person without losing any divine prerogatives and then he was born of a virgin and...” and then trailing off awkwardly. Of course you can talk about one without talking about the other. The person and work can be distinguished and thought about separately, but this separation is an artificial thing, an algebraic-like construct and atomization that helps us to grasp and grapple with a complicated single reality. What this means is that we must think of the person and work of Jesus as one continuous whole that climaxes in his death and resurrection. The person and work of Jesus are not two separate buckets that we make sure we always put next to each other. They're not even two separate pieces of material that we carefully

stitch together into one garment. The person and work of Jesus are two ways of talking about the one, singular, amazing piece of cloth.

Christology from which direction?

Before we run with wild abandon into this grand mystery, let's quickly outline what the plan of attack is. In discussions of Christology—that is, discussions about who Jesus is and what he was doing—direction is critical. From which direction are you going to come at this question? The options are usually either 'from below' or 'from above'. Before we get there though I think there's another direction we need to think about: are we going to do this 'looking forward' or 'looking backward'?

Discussions about Jesus, and particularly about the incarnation, easily unravel into speculation. We start with what we think it is possible for God to do, and then from that starting point we think about what, therefore, must or must not have happened in the incarnation. So some might say that God is pure spirit and therefore he could never have become anything physical. Or they might say that God is pure power and majesty and so it's impossible for him to ever stoop to being a man. This would be looking forward from what we already decide is and isn't possible to then what God could or couldn't have done.

Karl Barth is a theological giant, and while I don't agree with everything he says, at this point what he says is exactly right. Writing about Jesus being 100% man and 100% God, Barth argues that all theology must be done looking backward to what God has actually done, especially

when it comes to thinking about the incarnation and what is or isn't possible for God to do:

If we think that this is impossible it is because our concept of God is too narrow, too arbitrary, too human—far too human. Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed Himself and His nature, the essence of the divine. And if He has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as the God who does this, it is not for us to be wiser than He and to say that it is in contradiction with the divine essence. We have to be ready to be taught by Him that we have been too small and perverted in our thinking about Him within the framework of a false idea about God... We cannot make [our ideas] the standard by which to measure what God can or cannot do, or the basis of the judgment that in doing this He brings Himself into self-contradiction. By doing this God proves to us that He can do it, that to do it is within His nature.⁵

Theology needs to be done *after the fact*, looking backwards to what the Bible says *actually happened* rather than speculating and imagining what *we think* is possible. So the first direction we'll be facing is backward. We'll start with looking back to what the Bible says occurred and then we'll move forward from there.

But what about above or below? What do they mean and which one will we do? Christology from below starts with the historical Jesus and tries to in some way 'get behind'

5 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, p. 186.

the church's proclamation of Jesus in the creeds and even in the biblical texts themselves, to try and work out 'what really happened' and to trace how the church developed its current understanding of who this Jesus is from the 'historical truth' that lies behind it. Christology from below takes the historicity of Jesus very seriously. The question that Christology from below asks about the incarnation is: what is it about human beings that make it possible for one of them to also, in some sense, be the vehicle of divine salvation? This is actually quite a good question. Unfortunately, it has led some scholars to pick and choose—and even colour-code—which parts of the Gospels are 'historical' and which aren't, trying to retro-engineer the 'historical truth' from what the Bible says happened. As Michael Bird warns, "the historical Jesus risks becoming more 'canonical' than the Jesus of the canonical Gospels themselves".⁶

Christology from above, on the other hand, doesn't start with the historical Jesus but starts with Jesus as a divine being who becomes human. The focus here is on the church's proclamation of who Jesus is. This approach begins with a concept of God, and the historicity of Jesus, while not ignored or denied, is much less important compared to the philosophy and metaphysics of the incarnation. The question that Christology from above asks is: what is it about God that makes him able to incarnate himself as a man? Again, this is actually a good question. The problem is that at its extreme, this viewpoint can at times be almost careless as to whether the 'Christ of Faith' is even the same as the 'Jesus of History'. This ambivalence can be a real

6 Michael F Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2013, p. 350.

problem for those of us who take seriously the idea of a God who acts in history.

So from which direction are we going to approach Jesus in this book? I think ‘from above or from below’ is a false distinction that the Bible doesn’t encourage us to make. The New Testament encourages us to think about Jesus from both directions. The historicity of Jesus is vital, as Paul says, “for this has not been done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). But the historical Jesus is also the resurrected and exalted Lord. The one who was “before all things” (Col 1:17) is the same one who was “descended from David according to the flesh” (Rom 1:3).

Instead of asking “Do I want caramel or do I want salt?” let’s blow our taste buds out of the water and do the counter-intuitive, but no less extraordinarily delicious, salted caramel. Why can’t we have both? When it comes to thinking about Jesus we will take the same approach: rather than choose between the falsely separated options of above or below, we’ll do them both at the same time.

Setting the table

So let’s set the table: over the rest of the book we’ll tease out what exactly it means that Jesus is God with meat. Even though it is the supreme mystery, and even though we don’t know everything there is to know and God hasn’t revealed everything to us, there’s still a whole lot that we can say. God hasn’t shown us all the detailed mechanics of exactly how this union between God the Son and humanity works but, even though there is a chasm that we just cannot cross, there is still a lot of theological road that has

been revealed to us and that we can walk down before we get to that point.

In the next few chapters, we'll dive straight into what the Bible does say when it comes to the incarnation and look at what evidence we have for this claim that Jesus is the God-man. What does the Bible say is the purpose of the incarnation? Let's see.