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The Origin of the Incarnation

Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin-offering hast thou not required. Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, oh my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

PSALM 40.6–8

Dearly beloved brethren, on this day which we have set apart for showing forth the Lord's death by the sacrament of the supper, I consider it to be due unto his honour, and a right acknowledgement of our faith, that we should begin to meditate, and to set forth in order the great work of his incarnation, and the benefits which flow thence into our souls; to the end that, when God beholdeth us to be one of mind and spirit to honour and glorify his Son, he may be well pleased in us and make himself known to us in the breaking of bread. And may the Holy Spirit, who receiveth of the things of Christ to show them unto us, at this time so anoint us all with his holy unction of truth, that we may be able to search into the deep things of God, and to present them for the edification of the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who filleth all in all.

THE FALL OF HUMANITY AS THE IMMEDIATE, BUT NOT EXCLUSIVE, ORIGIN OF THE INCARNATION

The immediate cause of the incarnation, was the fall of man and the consequent invasion of sin, and the subjection of all earthly things to the prince of darkness. I say that this was the immediate cause, or, as we may say, the occasion of it: for, if man had not fallen, there would never have been upon this earth any such event as the incarnation, whereof the first fruit is to recover that which Adam lost, and, at the least to reinstate mankind and their habitation in that condition wherein they were created. This fall of man was also the formal cause of the incarnation; that is to say, what gave to the purpose of God its outward form and character, requiring his Son to take upon him the nature of man, and not of angels, to be under the law and to bear the curse of death, as it is written:

for as much then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (Hebrews 2.14–15)

But, if we would ascend to the first cause of this great act of the God-head, we must seek it in God himself, who worketh all things after the pleasure of his own will, and to the praise of his own glory. The fall of man was not an accident which fell out against the disposition into the hindrance of God's universal and all-including scheme of creation, and providence, and grace: but though the will of man was free,—that is, under his own single control, and not in bondage of a stronger as now it is,—yet was the act of his disobedience both known and foreseen and permitted of God, though not in such a way as to overrule, or constrain, or in anyway to bias his mind to evil, but all the contrary.

And as it was foreseen, so was it provided for; and as it was permitted, so was it overruled for the greater glory and honour of the most holy and righteous God, and for the total and eternal extinction and abolition of the active power of sin. Therefore is it most necessary to reach to a higher and more remote source than the full, or even the creation of our first parents, in order to attain into the great and first cause of the mystery of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And the rule is general, that we must wholly disentangle every spiritual subject from the conditions of space and time, which are only the forms of its manifestation, ere we can arrive at his proper bearings or handle it in a way profitable to the spiritual life.

THE ORIGIN OF THE INCARNATION BEFORE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD

Accordingly, it is written concerning this mystery of the incarnation, in various parts of Scripture, that it came not within the coasts of time, but had its origin before the foundation of the world. In the beginning of his gospel, the testimony of John is given to this effect, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1.29): concerning which Lamb he testifies, that he was “slain in the foundation of the world [. . .] whose names are not written the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13.8). But lest anyone should say this doth carry the offering of Christ only to, and not beyond the foundation of the world, I have Christ’s testimony concerning himself: “Father, I will they also, whom thou hast given me be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth” (John 17.21).

And lest this should be interpreted of the Father’s love to him anterior to an independent of his *mediatorial* office (although it is, to my mind, nothing less than an absurdity in contradiction to imagine that the Father can contemplate his Son otherwise than in the fullness of all his offices, there being no application of time to the Godhead), I have to shew you a passage which places the sacrifice of the lamb, yea, and the foot and the foreordination and appointment of it, before the foundation of the world:

forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, a silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot; who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you. (1 Peter 1.18–20)

In which idea that the apostles were rooted and grounded, you cannot read one of their epistles without perceiving; where you shall find that it is not in the fall of man they date the origin of our redemption, but in the eternal council of God, which he purposed in himself before the world began, as it is written:

who had saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began; but is now made manifest by the appearing of our saviour Jesus Christ, who has abolished death, and have brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (2 Timothy 1.9)

In which passage, that which is seen and temporal with respect to the Messiah, is regarded merely as the manifestation of that purpose which the Godhead had purposed in himself before the world was, before any world was; all good purposes being ever present with him, and the execution of them all ever seen in the fullness of the Word, contemplated in him as their great architect, and fabricator, and upholder. But the full development of this doctrine is to be found written in the epistle to the Ephesians; of which Paul himself doth witness the great depth, saying, that when we read it, we may understand his knowledge in the mystery of Christ. If you read it with me, at the third verse of the first chapter, you will find that the apostle carries us out of *place*; At verse 4, out of *time*; at verse 5, out of the *present age*; and at verse 6, out of all *external cause*; at verse 7, he rehearseth the act of its *revelation in time*; and in verses 8–10, consummates the *act*; in verse 11 he takes in the *personal interest*, and in verse 12 he shows the *end of the purpose*.¹

THE DIVINE WILL IS THE ULTIMATE ORIGIN OF THE INCARNATION

The doctrine, therefore, concerning the incarnation, upon which the primitive church was founded by the apostles, and to which the Reformers brought us back, and from which are fast swerving again is this: That it is a great purpose of the divine will which God was minded from all eternity to make known unto his creatures, for their greater information, delight and blessedness; to make known, I say, to all his intelligent creatures, the grace and mercy, the forgiveness and love which he beareth towards those who love the honour of his Son, and believe in the word of his testimony. In order that thereby his children, comprehending more fully the beauty and loveliness of the divine majesty, might desire him the more, and cleave unto him with an entire fidelity. Which aspect, if I may so speak, of the divine character, could never be beheld by a creature unfallen; forasmuch as grace and mercy, and forgiveness, do necessarily presuppose and require guilt, and offence, and hatefulness, for the objects upon which to put themselves forth, as necessarily as the power, and wisdom, and order, and harmony of creation require a chaos, and confusion, and darkness which they may adorn, and order, and bless. And as God did not at once command the created world to come forth as we now behold it, but first permitted a chaos which was without form and void, in order that by successive acts of wisdom and goodness, he might order it into beauty and light; so also did he permit that in the moral part of his works there should be a rebellion, and

1. Italics added.

darkness, and disobedience, in order that by successive acts of compelling grace, he might lead out the harmony and unity of all his chosen, “against the dispensation of the fulness of the times when he shall gather together in all things in Christ, both which are in the heavens and which are on the earth” (Ephesians 1.10).

And in thus proceeding, he doth manifest the grace or favour which he beareth even to sinners who honour his Son, giving his Son thereby a very great exaltation before the heavenly host, which they perceive that for his sake the Father of all can forgive sin. This, then, you will bear in mind, that the incarnation of his Son is the way by which God revealeth the more tender aspect of his being called *grace*—that part of the divine substance which could not otherwise have been made known. And therefore the gospel is called a mystery, because it was long hid to all, and yet in a measure hid unto all, being still only in the act and progress of unfolding itself. Abraham had a distant prospect of it, and Moses had a material model of it, the psalmist a royal foretaste of it, and the prophets a national manifestation of it, which yet themselves understood not, though they believed; and our Lord verified Abraham’s distant view, substantiated Moses’ shadow, answered part of the predictions of the psalms and the prophets, prepared the way of the Spirit to open the mystery more perfectly to the apostles, and promised that he would come again to manifest, clear up, and accomplish what still lay shrouded in the mystery: and this we look for him to accomplish against the dispensation of the fulness of the times. And to this agree the words of the apostle, when speaking of the insight which had been given unto him,

Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ; which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel. (Ephesians 3.4–6)

And further:

Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ: to the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3.8–11)

Upon which word “now,” I remark, that we, that the principalities and powers in heavenly places, that all created beings, shall have no other revelation than we now possess in the church concerning the manifold wisdom of God; though, as it opens more and more, and is by the Lion of the tribe of Judah unsealed more and more, it shall be more and more discovered what treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hid in Jesus Christ, in whom it hath pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell: “That in the ages to come he might show us the exceeding riches of his grace, in his kindness towards us through Christ Jesus.” (Ephesians 2.7)

Take this, therefore, my beloved brethren, for the true principle of the work of the incarnation, that it was a purpose which God purposed in himself, to make known by Jesus Christ, and by all who shall honour and cleave to him, the riches of his grace and mercy to the chief of sinners. And taking this for the true account of the matter, be comforted and strengthened and edified, in knowing that there is nothing accidental nor circumstantial in the work of your redemption, but that it is complete in him in whom ye believe and trust;—that as the men are carried safe who cleave unto the lifeboat, while the men that rashly commit themselves to the billows are dashed to pieces, or, to keep to the sacred emblem, as the souls who believed Noah and took refuge in the ark were saved, while all the rest perished, so you have nothing to fear if ye cleave to Christ, and resign yourselves to the shelter of his brooding wings. Oh, our fathers knew the comfort of this doctrine of the unconditional, uncircumstantial, unaccidental, the substantial, eternal, and unchangeable election in Christ Jesus; and, receiving it, they grew into his similitude, and were strengthened to do works of his holiness. But we have confounded the security of the divine purpose which includeth the church, and embraceth every spirit which believeth in Jesus, and which is the argument for believing in him, that we may be so kept in safety for ever; this we have confounded by looking continually at the varieties of the moods and frames of the natural man, and changing conditions of the visible church, which have no more to do with the constancy of that purpose in which we are wrapped up with Jesus, than this changing atmosphere and cloudy canopy over our heads hath to do with the fixed stars of heaven, and the constant light and heat of the glorious sun.

THE ORIGIN OF SIN IN THE CREATURE’S WILL AND THE CHARACTER OF SALVATION

So much have I to say in the general way which one topic of a discourse can contain, concerning the first and great cause of the incarnation of our Lord