

Introduction

to “The Origin of the Incarnation”

Irving identifies the ultimate ground of the incarnation of God the Son as the will of the Father to be God *for us*. This divine will to redeem has its primordial expression before the foundation of the world in the covenant between the Father and the Son. The will to create, redeem, and welcome into communion with himself is singular and consistent throughout God’s actions toward creation, culminating in the incarnate life of God the Son.

Correspondingly, Irving identifies the *human* will as the origin of sin. This is a significant element of Irving’s hamartiology. Sin is an internal—a spiritual—disorientation, which manifests itself through extrinsic action, but it cannot be reduced to the latter. Salvation, therefore, must involve the alienated will being overcome. As such, atonement cannot be reduced to penal terms alone. Instead, in accordance with the pre-temporal divine will, God the Son became human, assuming the fallen human will, and triumphed over it in the power of the Spirit.

The doctrine of the Trinity, then, is foundational to Irving’s theological vision. The Father enacts his will to save through the Son by the Spirit as the Son assumes human nature into union with himself and surrenders human will to the Father by the power of the Spirit. This has a couple of immediate implications. First, the inward reclamation of humanity, Irving believes, far exceeds a theory of the atonement that is exhausted by Christ’s suffering the penalty of sin. Therefore, Irving presses us to consider the atoning work of Christ in ontological rather than forensic categories. Second, the saving work of God is revelatory: the life of Christ reveals the triune God at work to save. In this, Irving places before us the necessary connection between revelation and salvation, reminding us that the

knowledge of God is never static, as it were, but has the actuality of God's act to save as its foundation and context.

A portion of this sermon—some twenty pages in the original volume—has been omitted. In these pages, Irving describes the vicarious sufferings of Christ as the substitution of the innocent for the guilty. Irving is alert to the objections that his listeners might have to the proposition that the innocent might suffer for the guilty. Characteristically, Irving elucidates this doctrine in trinitarian terms: the incarnate Son is not an unwilling and fearful vessel, but rather the eternal Son, who delights to do the will of the Father. This saving substitution is not best understood as a cold legalistic exchange, but in the personal categories of will as it is the Father's will to permit and surrender his Son, the Son's willingness to obey, and the Spirit's willingness to bring about. As such, Irving provides a filial framework for the forensic exchange whereby sin is imputed to Christ and his righteousness gifted to us. This being established, Irving moves to an extended exegetical section in which, from 1 Peter 3.18 and Colossians 1.19–23, he demonstrates the close relationship between the incarnation, the vicarious suffering of Christ, and reconciliation. His discussion includes recognizably Reformed theological categories such as Christ's active and passive obedience, the justification of believing sinners, the propitiation of the wrath of God and the cleansing of sin.

The final sections of the sermon, which are included in this abridgement, are taken up with pastoral comments regarding assurance of salvation. Irving encourages his listeners to establish their assurance of salvation on the unchangeable will of God to be for them. He warns against establishing trust on either the institutional church or on their own personal spiritual growth. The former he sees as formalistic and the latter he sees as an effect rather than a foundation of salvation. Against these, Irving encourages us to focus our minds on the Father's purpose before the foundation of the world to send the Son in the power of the Spirit.

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