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The Scandal of the Flesh-Becoming Word

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The Scandal of the Sca

At times I wonder why any of Jesus' contemporaries missed who he was. It all seems so clear from a distant believer's standpoint, and yet just as the Incarnation scandalized first-century audiences it may do the same for us if we consider what it really was...and is. On one hand, the Incarnation reveals the character of the Father gloriously. On the other, that revelation becomes a scandal because it comes to us in forms we least expect. This produces a crisis within us: will we cling to our creaturely notions of the ways God "ought" to work, and be like, or will we be open to the newness of life that comes with the unexpectedness of authentic revelation? This is the
The Flesh-Becoming Word

By Paul Anderson

Christ-lights, the family all of these a fate to the With re-signifying ushered living, is anything but Jesus' only-begotten One, full of grace and truth." (John 1:11-14, translation by the author)

So what does it mean to you and me that the eternal God is revealed in the fleshliness of Jesus? For one thing, Jesus reveals God's love and grace dynamically. We are not simply "told" God accepts and loves the unlovely, but Jesus dined with tax-gatherers and "sinners" as a declaration from God to that effect. In Jesus we see the healing and forgiving power of God liberating the bound and harassed from demons within and shackles without, and we find ourselves set free from paralyzing fear and oppressive worldly structures. As we read of transforming encounters with God through Jesus, we experience ourselves addressed—and even called by name. The love of God is revealed far more powerfully in the animate form of a living, breathing person than by means of a symbol, a notion or a new law. God's Word was pronounced in a declaration thirty-three years long, and Christ the Living Word continues to address us today.

Consider this illustration. Several years ago my parents, Alvin and Lucy Anderson, spent a two-year Fulbright term in Calabar, Nigeria. During one of their trips into the bush country, they met for Sunday worship with local believers under a large, open air, thatched roof. Dogs wandered between the single-board benches, and crying babies were passed down the row until consoled by a person with the right touch. After a couple of hours of singing, and clapping, and "participatory" worship, the preacher launched into the message.

"Many, many years ago," he began, "God wanted to tell the world he loved us. So he sent a thunder storm—but we were frightened." People nodded. "Next, God sent an earthquake, but people felt God was angry. So God sent fire, and wind, but people did not understand or feel God's love. Then God had an idea," the preacher announced. Members of the audience leaned forward. "God said, 'I'll send a baby. No one is afraid of a baby!'" Heads nodded, vigorously, and smiling glances passed between knowing adults. "And that is what Christmas is about," declared the preacher. "God sent his message of love to us in the form of a baby."

While a simple story, this is also a powerful illustration of the flesh-becoming Word of God. St. Augustine claimed that all of Christianity's doctrines had their parallels in other religions...except one: the Incarnation, and he was right. Many religions have described the divinization of the devout and the rewarding of the faithful, but no other faith claims that God became a human—flesh and bone, like you and me. Furthermore, the Christian claim is that God's glory is revealed, not aside from Jesus' humanity, but through it. And this is a radical notion indeed!

In so doing, the flesh-becoming Word defies the way God ought to have redeemed the world. Societies function by merit and deservedness. We receive the favor of others by our good behavior and earn a wage to live on by our production and labor. "If you don't do the work, you don't get paid." That's the way it works in the world...but the Incarnation is counter-conventional. While we were yet sinners Christ came, lived and died for us as an expression of God's love. It is not that we loved God, but that God first loved us which marks the theme of Christmas. God gave his Son at the first Christmas, he didn't loan or trade him as a transaction, rewarding humanity for its deservedness or initiative.

No. The initiative is not ours, but God's, and the only appropriate way to consider God's saving action toward humanity is to receive it with gratitude and to respond in faith to the Divine Initiative. Our concocted schemes for success...
May we remember that the wood of the manger is of the same stock as the wood of the cross.

And, in the same coin, all we have to offer a needy world is the changed and changing lives of those gathered at the Master’s feet and scattered to wash the feet of others. When we do so and serve others in the name of Jesus, the Word becomes flesh again. The one unmistakable ordinance of Jesus in the Scriptures is the command to love one another as he has loved us, and by that love will all humanity know that we are his disciples. In this sense, an incarnated message of love is not only what we receive from God; it is what we become to the world.

In yet another way, however, the Incarnation is a scandal. At times we may want thunder, and lightning, and earthquakes to make the nations take note and bow down. We may wish the saving action of God to be such that we become successes and winners, vindicated by the world. We demand a sign before believing...and wish the stones would turn to bread. Our temptation is to strike the rock again instead of speaking to it as the Lord commands. After all, it “worked” the first time. We hoard the daily-given manna for a long-term supply; we crave the flesh of quail; we yearn for the flesh-pots of Egypt. We lust for a king—for power—instead of contenting ourselves with the Shekinah presence of the covenantal Ark within the camp. Saying to ourselves, “These are the ways God saves and rescues us...aren’t they?” we justify our faithless stabs in the fog. But the Incarnation declares otherwise. In our human-made schemes, God’s job is to make the way easy for us, but when God’s final Word is spoken, we hear only a still, small voice if we hear it at all. The flesh-becoming Word is not a sensationalistic wonder but a modest human being, Jesus, and this becomes a scandal to our worldly sensibilities.

But we are not alone in being scandalized. The Jewish leaders rejected Jesus, and the Romans put him to death as a seditious criminal. Even some of Jesus’ disciples abandoned him and walked with him no more, ironically, not long after they wanted to
The “bread” which the Son of Man offers is his flesh, given for the life of the world, but the receptacle on which it is offered is a ‘platter’ hewn into the shape of a cross.

Paul Anderson
The Christology of the Fourth Gospel, 1996, p.207

For in all your afflictions and sufferings, he is with you, [you] who are made alive by him and have drunk his Blood, and so are come to be faithful witnesses of Christ Jesus... The outward Jews did eat of the Manna in the wilderness, disobeyed and perished. But they that eat of the flesh of Christ and drink his Blood, have Life everlasting.

George Fox

When we serve others in the name of Jesus, the Word becomes flesh again.

So just what was that point, anyway? On one hand, unless one ingests the flesh and blood of Jesus one has no life; on the other hand, “the flesh” profits nothing. The key to this puzzle turns on verse 51c. When Jesus says, “The bread I give you is my flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world,” he is speaking of Calvary. The point here is that to ingest Jesus’ flesh and blood is to be willing to go with him to the cross, and George Fox understood that meaning exactly. And that “hard message” is precisely the reason Jesus’ disciples were scandalized—not because they missed his meaning, but because they had grasped it undeniably. No wonder some of them departed and walked with him no longer (vs. 66). They counted the cost of shouldering the cross and found it too high.

So in terms of discipleship, the Incarnation becomes a scandal not only to early Christians, but to ordinary folks like you and me. As the disciples of old, what we may have hoped would lead to being seated at a place of honor has

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Astonished at the Shepherds

Rustic folks may be unrefined, unsophisticated, even crude—conditions remedied by learning and wider social experience—but they are not stupid.

They keep eyes and ears tuned to earthy things around them, holding fewer presuppositions, probably, than urbane people who appear more comfortable with ideas than with things.

People lacking opportunity nightly to gaze heavenward and ponder all the mysteries of the cosmos and its Creator are understandably astonished at microscopic lifeforms that tumbled to earth recently, geologically speaking.

Night shepherds may be startled by intimations of other worlds, but they are not astonished, they believe in the Creator.

Two thousand years ago, night shepherds were startled by angelicannunciations of the Messianic birth, of salvation for our Earth.

Who will hear the shepherds? Those so hemmed in by systems and by cities, so life-burdened, so housed away from night glory that we are joyously astonished at God’s Good News!

Arthur O.Roberts, 1996
(More poems on page 22)
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Proverbs 27:10

Do not forget your friends...

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actually become an invitation to drink the cup that Jesus drinks and to be baptized with his baptism into suffering and death. Gulp! This may not be what we’d signed up for, and yet, hardship is always involved in the pursuit of Truth and being advocates for the oppressed.

As we consider this Christmas God’s love spoken in the form of a baby, may our hearts be warmed by the innocence and charm of such a reminder. But on the other hand, may we remember that the wood of the manger is of the same stock as the wood of the cross. This is the scandal of the flesh-becoming Word—itself an invitation, as young James Parnell put it, to be willing that self should suffer for Truth, and not that Truth should suffer for self. Merry Christmas!

Paul Anderson is associate professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. He and his wife Carla have three daughters, Sarah, Della and Olivia.

Innkeepers Then and Now

They could have hung, for all to see, the usual sign, “No Vacancy,” then locked the door and dimmed the light, forgetting business for the night. Why didn’t they? Well, maybe God enabled them to see in anxious faces the sad plight of refugees. Moral insight comes to all of us to whom the Lord grants one good look at Mary’s eyes. Then we find room for the dispossessed, some nook, some over-looked or unused space, for homeless people a warm place.

-Arthur O. Roberts, 1995

Poet, philosopher, and professor-at-large at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, Arthur Roberts is the editor of Quaker Religious Thought.

The Word Made Flesh

On a very special day two millennia ago by the body of a baby born one night in Bethlehem, God touched time and space, tissue and intelligence with full redemptive grace.

Annually we celebrate that wonderful event. We sense the Annunciation on our skin and in our bones. Our blood pulses to its tempo. The Advent courses through the circuits of our brains confirming that in God we live and move, and have our being.

Oh, what a joy, the Word made flesh!

-Arthur O. Roberts, 1996