the necessity of an experience of a 'law work', concepts such as *self-deception, conviction of sin* and *evidence of election* are not readily detachable from what it means to be a Christian. They are part of what a Christian *is*. To use such concepts is not simply to employ a traditional or historically-conditioned way of describing something that might equally well be described in others ways. These descriptions are part of the Christian's self-understanding, they determine the character of such a Christian's experience, they are for him inseparable from spiritual life. Thus it is not a light thing to be invited to entertain the thought that long-honoured Christian teachers have been mistaken in principle about the Christian faith, and have distorted the biblical message so as to subvert the very principle of salvation by grace through faith alone. It is of the utmost importance for the Christian's self-understanding and self-identity to try to get and to keep such matters straight.

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Incarnation

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Like the crucifixion, which we looked at in an earlier issue, the Incarnation belongs to the inner circle of Christian teaching. It is part of that precious store of doctrine which shapes the whole of our Christian life and penetrates beyond it to bear witness, even in our secular society, of the abiding truths of the Gospel. Christmas, the great feast of the Incarnation, is the most popular holiday of the year; it has even spread, thanks to commercialism, to non-Christian countries like Japan. At the theological level, books like *The Myth of God Incarnate* and its successors remind us of the importance of the doctrine in contemporary theological debate. Somewhere inbetween these two extremes, a host of voices calls us to practise a more 'incarnational' faith, by which is usually meant a modified form of that social gospel which passed for liberalism in the 1920's.

At every level of the Church, the Incarnation is now making itself felt, perhaps more than any other single doctrine. In the Scriptures it is spoken of somewhat indirectly in Matthew and Luke; it can also be found in Philippians 2:5-11, in Colossians and in Hebrews, not to mention half a dozen or so other passages. Yet by common consent, both in modern times and since the early Church period, the main focus of our attention is the Fourth Gospel, in particular the famous Prologue, and especially John 1:14 — *the Word became flesh*. John's speech is at once arrestingly direct and tantalizingly obscure. What can it mean to say that the word, which is surely an intangible thing, became *flesh*? The text hardly lends itself to any kind of allegory or typology, but what can the literal sense possibly mean?

Dr Bray continues his series of fresh assessments of key Biblical doctrines.

The need for caution is reinforced when we remember that the Christological disputes of the early centuries, which culminated in the famous, and now much-maligned, definition of the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), can largely be understood as an attempt to expound this verse correctly. For Athanasius (c 296-373), it was the key to Christology, and his views, as we know, were appealed to by later generations as the irreproachable source of orthodoxy. An entire theological system was built on the polarity of Word and flesh, which, with minor modifications in the interests of greater clarity, remains the touchstone of right belief even today.

The extent to which this is accepted was demonstrated by the furore caused by recent assertions that the Incarnation is a 'myth'; the controversy revealed, if nothing else, just how deep the roots of incarnational orthodoxy are, even today. Nevertheless, the dispute also showed that many believers have a faith in the Incarnation which is more passive than active, more traditional than vital. To attack it might be sacrilege, but to

defend it coherently and adequately was a task beyond the reach (and, if the truth be told, outside the interests) of many. As with so many of the familiar landmarks of faith, its importance was sensed and accepted without being fully understood. What Christ *did* (on the cross) remained for many more immediately important than Who He was.

It is always easier to tell a story than to explain a concept, and

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the Incarnation has been one of the chief sufferers from this tendency. At Christmas, when the doctrine can hardly be avoided, a nativity play staged by the Sunday School can always squeeze out a sermon, and the casual church-goers who appear in the pews do not want to be shaken out of their carolling sentimentality into serious intellectual argument! The Incarnation is smothered in pious goodwill, and the Church itself allows its doctrinal foundations to be sapped by ignorant folklore.

To resist the prevailing trend is never easy, but it must surely be attempted. In the Book of Common Prayer, the Epistle and Gospel for Christmas Day are Hebrews 1 and John 1 respectively — a clear reminder that the purpose of celebration is rooted, not in a manger at Bethlehem, but in the eternal plan of God, now made manifest in Christ, the fulness of the divine Revelation to men. We are not dealing here with an accident, or with no more than a rather unusual event. The Incarnation of Christ is a moment of the deepest spiritual and historical significance. God, who 'at sundry times and in divers manners' had spoken to the ancients by the prophets, now *in these last days* has spoken to us in His Son! The coming of Christ is the beginning of the final act of God's saving work — the *last days* are upon us, signalled not by the current threat of nuclear destruction but by the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! The terror of judgment and the promise of redemption come together in this, the final visitation of God to His people.

When God chose to become man, we note that He did so as the Word. Much has been written about this Logos of God, and we know that the Greek term can mean *mind, thought* and *reason* even more readily than *word* (which in Greek is *lexis*). But, however we translate it, we cannot escape the simple fact that the Logos appears as an intellectual, somewhat abstract reality. Many scholars have equated it with Platonic or Stoic concepts of a Supreme Mind, and this has led to the accusation that both the Johannine Prologue and the doctrine of the Incarnation are manifestations of a Hellenistic intrusion into the realms of Christian piety. We need not examine every argument in detail; it is sufficient to note that what *happened* to the Logos, the fact that it *became flesh*, makes a Greek philosophical influence impossible.

It is a basic axiom of every Greek school of philosophy that the spiritual and material realms do not mix. Even Stoicism, which held that spirit was a highly refined form of matter, could not countenance such a change. In any case, Greek philosophy thought primarily in terms of *nature(s)*, which means that for the Logos to have become 'flesh' would imply a chemical transformation of the divine essence into human flesh. Such a transformation, even if it were possible, would mean the extinction of the Logos as a separate entity, rather as the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly 'destroys' the former. Once such a change had taken place in the Logos, it would have been impossible to behold his glory, as the text says the disciples did. There is, therefore, no reason at all to suppose that the text reflects a philosophical influence of any kind.

In fact, as the fathers of the Church saw, the Incarnation cannot be explained solely in terms of *nature*. In Christ there are two natures, as the Chalcedonian Definition affirmed, which are 'without confusion and without change'. Each nature, the divine and the human, retains its own properties intact, with no infringement on or by the other. The union, and thus the *became* of John 1:14, can only be understood in terms of *person*. The Word is not a thing, but the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. In becoming flesh, this Person took to Himself a human nature, not by divesting Himself of His divinity, which He could not do, but by adding to Himself a second nature — 'taking the Manhood into God' in the words of the Athanasian Creed.

The flesh in this context means the created nature of Adam. It must be understood that of itself, the flesh is neither sinful nor sinning. True, Jesus came 'in the likeness of sinful flesh' (Romans 8:3), but this means, not that He was a sinner, but that He possessed the same basic nature as Adam who sinned. This was a necessity, since without this He could not have become sin for us on the cross. The point here is merely that sin is not a category which can be applied to any natural thing, simply on the basis of creation. Sin is a personal act of disobedience, which in Adam produced a fallen state which every human being has inherited. There are many times when the New Testament uses the word *flesh* to describe mankind in his fallen state, but when this happens the term is a spiritual and not a physical one.

John 1:14, on the other hand, uses the word in its physical sense, as is apparent from the following line, 'we beheld his glory'. At the purely natural level, it would have been quite

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impossible for anyone to behold the glory of the Word in the human flesh of Jesus. We know this from the Gospels. Jesus grew up in Nazareth, but when He began to preach His own village rejected Him — they had known Him all His life, and it was quite clear to them that His pretensions to be a prophet and teacher could not possibly be true. Nicodemus recognised that He was 'a teacher come from God' because of the miracles He performed, but that was still a far cry from beholding His

glory, as Jesus Himself was at pains to point out.

When recognition came, as it did in the case of Peter, Jesus Himself made it clear that this was not natural knowledge which any clever person might discern, but a special revelation from God (Matthew 16:17). To behold the glory of the Word was a privilege granted to few, and we must never forget that those few were men and women who had been touched by the Spirit of God.

Peter's confession, and even more the implication contained in the past tense of *beheld* must bring us to what is perhaps the most frequent question Christians ask about the Incarnation. Were the disciples specially privileged to see the Son of God in human flesh? Did they have an experience of Him which must forever be denied to those of us who follow after? How often do we imagine that our doubts and fears as believers would never exist if we had the master with us in the way the disciples did!

Certainly it must be admitted that it was a great privilege to live with Jesus, and we must never forget the importance of this for the subsequent witness of the Apostles. When the time came for them to choose a successor to the traitor Judas, they insisted on a man who had known Jesus from the beginning of His ministry (Acts 1:21-22). The Gospels themselves are eye-witness accounts of the events they describe, and no-one would question their special place, even within the inspired Scriptures. Yet these same Gospels offer us the greatest reassurance we need, that this imagined superiority of the disciples' experience has little basis in fact. In one sense, the Gospels are a rather discouraging record of failure — the failure to understand Jesus' teaching, the failure to obey His commands, the disloyalty of Peter and the others at the trial and crucifixion. This is hardly the behaviour we would expect from men who had beheld the gory of the Son of God! These men are set apart from us apostles, but they are like us in a way which we cannot fail to recognise as the authentic experience of every believer.

Why should this be so? The answer lies not so much in the basic sinfulness of the apostles, thought of course that must never be forgotten, as in the glory of the Word, which comes to us as it did to them. Jesus Christ is no longer present with us in the flesh, but the meaning of John 1:14 goes deeper than this. For the verse does not speak, as one might have expected, of the *Son* of God, except in conclusion. The main emphasis is on the Word, a fact which links the thought of the text with the Revelation. This extremely important point was clearly understood by Karl Barth, though tragically he was never able to draw the right conclusion from it.

The main emphasis is on the Word, a fact which links the thought of the text with the Revelation. This extremely important point was clearly understood by Karl Barth, though tragically he was never able to draw the right conclusion from it. The Word of God which became flesh in Jesus Christ has also become paper and ink in the word of the Bible.

The Word of God which became flesh in Jesus Christ has also become paper and ink in the words of the Bible. The Holy Scriptures are the Voice of God to the Church, the Word inscripturated. As Christians we need to understand that the Bible performs for us the same function as the incarnate body of the Son of God performed for the disciples. In other words, our doctrine of Scripture is not a philosophical abstraction based on a pagan notion of 'inspiration', but an offshoot of Christology. The same teaching which is applied to Christ can and must be aplied to the Bible as well. Christ is one divine Person in two natures — divine and human. So also, the Bible is one divine Voice in two natures, one divine and the other human. These two natures do not mix, but are held together by the Divine Voice speaking in and through the text.

Furthermore, just as the revelation of Christ's divinity was a gift of God and not the result of human investigation, so the recognition of the Scriptures as the Word of God can only come by the witness of the Spirit. Calvin saw this clearly when he said that it was the inner witness of the Holy Spirit which assures us of the truth of the Bible, though sadly he never seems to have tied his insight in this matter to his Christology, at least not explicitly. Today, of course, we see this truth in the work of modern Biblical scholars. Like Satan who tried to tempt Jesus into revealing His glory in the wrong way, these men play with the Scriptures in a forlorn attempt to tease out its secrets. They find nothing of course, no more than what a doctor would have found that he examined the entrails of the man Jesus. The Bible is only a human book to those deprived of the eye of faith.

Today it is in the Bible that we behold the glory of the Word. If we have not grasped the teaching of Jesus at this point — 'the Scriptures speak of me' (John 5:39) — we have not begun to read the Bible with the mind of Christ. We have not begun to consider the importance of the Incarnation for us today. The belief that the Church is the historical continuation of the incarnate Christ is attractive, but without Scriptural support. As Augustine observed, His body is in Heaven, and where the head is, there the members must be also. The more liberal view, that a Spirit-filled Jesus is the archetype of the life of self-sacrifice and morality demanded of His followers, is wishful thinking. Those who beheld His glory were immediately conscious of the gulf which separated Him from them — there was no possibility of merely human imitation here.

The Incarnation retains its importance for us as a living truth, (as opposed to its historical importance for the unfolding of God's plan of salvation), because it confirms the Scriptures and tells us how to understand them. How often are we told that Jesus did something or other, in order that 'the Scriptures might be fulfilled'. How often do we find in the Gospels words of Christ which point to the true meaning of the Bible, which is nothing less than the revelation of His message and the account of His work? Here is the true importance of this doctrine at the practical level today. The Word of God continues to dwell among us! God grant that we too might behold His glory, and in the pages of Scripture discern the Voice of the One who is the only-begotten Son of the Father!