

A study of Knowing God

by J. I. Packer

Chapter 5: "God Incarnate"

HPC Trinity Class

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The Greatest Mystery (pgs. 53-54)

In Dr. Packer's view, what is the #1 mystery in the gospel for most people?

- a. The miracles performed by Jesus
- b. Jesus' atonement for our sins
- c. Jesus' Incarnation
- d. Virgin birth

[READ JOHN 1:1-5]

Notice that John starts with "the Word," rather than "the Son." His Jewish readers would immediately recognize the connotation: in the Torah it was the Word of God which had power. "The Word of God is thus God at work." (pg. 56)



"Why must we start with the Book of John? It's so cryptic and...uhhg, different."

Answer: Because "John's Gospel is the only one which begins with a discussion of the eternal existence of Jesus Christ rather than the time He appeared on earth."¹

Jesus is referred to as "the Son of God" 23 times in the Gospels.²

- 7X in Matthew
- 4X in Mark
- 5X in Luke
- **11x in John.**

Who is This Child? (pgs. 55-56)

¹ *Key Word Bible*, fn. on JN 1:1-17, pg. 1238.

² "That Jews should ever have come to such a belief is amazing. Eight of the nine New Testament writers, like Jesus' original disciples, were Jews...." *Concise*, pg. 105.

- John knew that his readers would have pre-concieved ideas about someone being called “the Son of God.”
 - To Jews it meant the coming warrior Messiah—a strong, determined man who would rescue his people, much like a second Moses.
 - To the Greeks (and later the Romans) the mythology of olden days continued to have a strong influence. To them, any Son of God must be the child of one of their many gods.—nothing very special.

Neither of these concepts, however, allows us to know the Son of God as a *personal* diety. Thus, when John wrote his version some 20-30 years after the synoptic Gospels, instead of writing just another historical (human) rendition of Jesus, he melds the divine with the earthly to show us that Jesus and God are one.

That is why Dr. Packer claims that we should think of the Trinity and Incarnation as belonging together:

- the Trinity declares that the man Jesus is truly divine;
- the Incarnation declares that the divine Jesus is truly human.³

And that is also the reason why today when we recite the Nicene Creed we are affirming that Jesus is of the same “substance” or “essence” as the Father.

THE NICENE CREED

I BELIEVE IN ONE GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY, MAKER OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, OF ALL THINGS VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE. I BELIEVE IN ONE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD, BORN OF THE FATHER BEFORE ALL AGES. GOD FROM GOD, LIGHT FROM LIGHT, TRUE GOD FROM TRUE GOD, BEGOTTEN, NOT MADE, CONSUBSTANTIAL WITH THE FATHER; THROUGH HIM ALL THINGS WERE MADE. FOR US MEN AND FOR OUR SALVATION HE CAME DOWN FROM HEAVEN, AND BY THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS INCARNATE OF THE VIRGIN MARY, AND BECAME MAN. FOR OUR SAKE HE WAS CRUCIFIED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, HE SUFFERED DEATH AND WAS BURIED, AND ROSE AGAIN ON THE THIRD DAY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES. HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE FATHER. HE WILL COME AGAIN IN GLORY TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD AND HIS KINGDOM WILL HAVE NO END. I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE LORD, THE GIVER OF LIFE, WHO PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER AND THE SON, WHO WITH THE FATHER AND THE SON IS ADORED AND GLORIFIED, WHO HAS SPOKEN THROUGH THE PROPHETS. I BELIEVE IN ONE, HOLY, CATHOLIC AND APOSTOLIC CHURCH. I CONFESS ONE BAPTISM FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS AND I LOOK FORWARD TO THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD AND THE LIFE OF THE WORLD TO COME. AMEN.

³ Concise, pg. 104

Dr. Packer shows us seven key points in John's explanation of "the Word." See pg. 56-57 as we review them..

Born to Die (pgs. 58-59)

"The key text in the New Testament for interpreting the Incarnation is not, therefore, the bare statement in John 1:14..."

[READ JOHN 1:14a]

"...but rather the more comprehensive statement of 2 Corinthians...."

[READ 2 COR. 8:9].

Why is this quote from one of Paul's letters so important?

Because it tells us the **reason** for Christ's incarnation.

We should view it as a wonder of God's grace.

Made Less Than God? (pgs. 59-61)

Dr. Packer takes three pages to refute the *kenosis* theory, which first appeared in the late 1800s. *Kenosis* ("self-emptying") is the belief that Christ temporarily gave up or altered some of his divine attributes and powers when he dwelt among us. This is a mis-reading of Paul's letter to the Philippians:

"...but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,
being born in the likeness of men." (Phil 2:7)

Jesus chose to give up the divine glory and dignity, **not** his attributes and powers. *Kenosis*' "aim is to solve some of the supposed paradoxes arising from Jesus having both a divine nature and a human nature."⁴



But that's **WRONG**—"There is no Scripture support for the idea of the Son's shedding any aspect of his deity" (pg. 60). Jesus lost none of his divine attributes when he took on human form. Rather, the Bible gives the impression that Jesus' divine capacities were simply restrained at times, not that his deity was reduced.

⁴ "Kenosis," online at <https://www.theopedia.com/kenosis>. The *Kenosis* theory is based upon a misreading of Phil. 2:7.



He Became Poor (pgs. 63-64)

Finally, Dr. Packer emphasizes Jesus' poverty and the hope brought by Christmas. The message Jesus left with us is one of hope. However, the concluding remarks of Dr. Packer are bitter...but true. (*Re-read the bottom of page 65, beginning with. "It is a shame...."*)

Do you agree?

What, in your own words, is the "Christmas spirit"?

How is the church today failing to exhibit it?

What specific actions can you perform to manifest the Christmas spirit?

Additional Sources

- *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, NIV.*
AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN, 1996.
- *JesusAlive.cc* (online), references to Jesus as Son of God in the Gospels.
- *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., F. L. Cross, ed.
Oxford Univ. Press, England, 1974. [Kenotic Theories]
- Packer, J. I., *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historical Christian Beliefs.* Tyndal House Publishers. Wheaton, Ill, 1993.