

Immanuel: God Comes to Us

by Martin M. Davis

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him "Immanuel"—which means, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Some months before the first Christmas two millennia ago, an angel appeared to a Galilean carpenter and told him in a dream that his betrothed, a young peasant girl named Mary, would give birth to a child—not just any child, but a child who would be “Immanuel,” that is, “God with us.” A few months later, on the night the child was born, an angel appeared to a group of lowly shepherds and announced the greatest news that humankind has ever heard: “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

The birth of Jesus was more than an ordinary birth, for the child that came forth from the womb of Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). This child was both the Son of God and the Son of man, divinity and humanity

joined together in the one person, the God-man Jesus Christ. *God became flesh* and dwelt among us (John 1:1,14). On that first Christmas two thousand years ago, God and humanity (God and you and me!) were joined together.

Both Revelation and Reconciliation

Every religion, including much of Christianity, begins with the mistaken belief that God is “up there” and we are “down here,” so we have to do something in order to reach the God we imagine to be distant from us. We employ innumerable ways to bridge the gap between humanity and the divine:

- chants, crystals and catechisms
- mantras, meditation and mysticism
- penance, prayer books and pilgrimages
- sacraments, sinners’ prayers and self-denial.

Every religion and denomination has its recipe for success, a method or means by which we can gain access to an otherwise distant and remote deity.

Yet the coming of Jesus Christ into the world is *the coming of God to us*. Jesus himself is the literal embodiment of the central message of the Gospel that “God was reconciling the world [that includes you and me, your unchurched neighbor and the Muslim cashier at the corner convenience store!] to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus Christ is both the *revelation* of God to humanity and the *reconciliation* of God and humanity.

Immanuel means *God is with us*. Immanuel does not mean *God was with us* and then went away, only to watch us from a distance while leaving us to fend for ourselves. Nor does it mean that *God will be with us* if we adhere to a set of rules, say the Sinner’s Prayer or join a certain church.

All measures for working our

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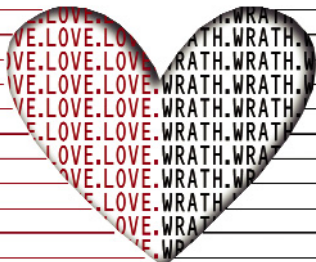
way to God are rendered redundant in Immanuel. As in Jacob's dream, Jesus is the ladder that joins heaven and earth! (John 1:51; Genesis 28:10-17, NKJV). Moreover, the baby born in the cradle in Bethlehem *embodies* all that the sacred temple represented to first-century Jews, who believed that the temple in Jerusalem was the place where God and humanity came together in solemn communion. Jesus Christ is the Temple itself, where God and humanity are forever joined together in one person, both Son of God and Son of man, in whom God and humanity are at peace.

In addition, the babe of Bethlehem is our eternal High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16), who has forever rendered redundant the need for priests, preachers and prophets to mediate the presence of God to the rest of us. Also, he is the one and only sacrifice needed for the sins of humanity, for the babe himself is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the *world* (John 1:29)—even your sin and mine!.

The Revelation of God

It is essential that we realize that in Jesus we see *God*. Jesus Christ himself is *The Revelation* of God to the world. While the majestic mountains and the vast oceans testify to the greatness of God, only Jesus is the exact representation of God (Hebrews 1:3). He is the one who has dwelt face to face with the Father from all eternity (John 1:1). What Jesus does is the work and will of the Father, and in so doing he reveals the Father to us. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

For too long...there has been an imagined split between the Father and the Son.



For too long in Christian history, however, there has been an imagined split between the Father and the Son. Many see the Father as an awful, angry judge who spits nails in fury, eager to take terrible but righteous vengeance on wayward sinners. On the other hand, many see Jesus as the

meek and mild Lamb of God who comes to assuage the Father's thirst for blood by taking the divine wrath upon himself in order to save humankind. Yet this wrong-headed thinking proves the fact that we do not realize that *in Jesus we see God as he is*.

In the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, we see the *model for our understanding of God's ways with the world*. To know what God is like toward us, we need only study the life of Jesus.

Among his closest associates was a tax collector (Matthew or Levi, see Luke 5:27), a man thoroughly despised by his fellow countrymen as a Roman collaborator and an enemy of the people. At Matthew's invitation, Jesus dined with a party of tax collectors, thus arousing the ire of the sanctimonious religious elite of his day by dining with "sinners" (Luke 5:29-32). Jesus' willingness to engage sinners in intimate table fellowship was scorned by the religious leaders who regarded the practice as an act of ritual uncleanness.

When a woman caught in adultery was brought before Jesus, the religious enthusiasts of his day wanted to stone her to death as the law required. Yet Jesus not

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only refused to lift a stone, he also refused to condemn the woman (John 8:1-11).

To the chagrin of the religious of the day, Jesus even dared to let a "woman who had lived a sinful life," probably a prostitute, anoint his feet with perfume and wipe them with her hair (Luke 7:36-39). Yet despite Jesus' willingness to engage sinners, many today see a great rift between themselves and God. They believe God is too holy (usually defined in a legal sense) to look upon sinners like themselves. Yet in Jesus we see *God engaging sinners* with compassion, care and love—even sinners like you and me!

Not only was Jesus willing to come near sinners; his concern and care for them was unending. Jesus willingly healed those with various diseases and afflictions who came to him in faith and trust. He raised the dead son of a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11-15), even though touching the corpse made him ritually unclean in the eyes of some religious onlookers. When vast crowds followed him into the wilderness, Jesus felt compassion for them because they lacked food (Matthew 15:32), so he miraculously fed them (and his provision for them was not dependent upon their "faith" in

The birth of Jesus Christ...is the pivot point of all history... God has become flesh and made his dwelling among us... A human being has taken his place inside the glorious circle of the Trinity and has created a dwelling place for you and me (John 14:2),



behind the back of Jesus. The loving ways of Jesus are the loving ways of God, the God who is for us, the God who freely chose, in the words of Karl Barth, *not to be God without us.*

The birth of Jesus Christ at that first

him nor their adherence to laws, rules and regulations). When he saw a crippled woman in the synagogue, he healed her, even though his merciful deed aroused the indignation of the synagogue ruler because he dared to heal on the Sabbath (Luke 13:10-17). When he approached Jerusalem near the end of his earthly life, he lamented over the city because they refused to come to him (Luke 13:34).

In the upper room, on the night before his death, Jesus revealed his servant's heart when he stooped to wash his disciples' feet—and in so doing subverted all worldly ideas about power and greatness. Finally, after he had been beaten, brutally tortured and nailed to a cross, Jesus showed his unending compassion, even for those who had executed him. He cried, "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

The Heart of God

In the caring and compassionate

acts of Jesus, we do not see merely the loving heart of a good man. Rather, we see the loving, compassionate heart of God, *for the heart of the Son is not different from the heart of the Father.*

In the 4th century a great theological battle was fought to insure that Christians understand that Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is not merely like God, he is of the same substance and being of God. He is "God of God, Light of light, very God of very God" to borrow the words of the Nicene

Creed. Thus, when we realize

that Jesus engaged sinners at an intimate level in table fellowship, healed them of diseases and afflictions, provided for them in the wilderness, washed their feet and forgave them of their incredible brutality toward him, we realize that *this is how God is toward us.*

His love and care for us do not depend on our good works, church attendance, tithes and offerings or penance. His love and care come directly from the depths of the very being of God, for God is not merely loving, *God IS love* (1 John 4:8). When we look into the pulsing, compassionate heart of Jesus, we look into the depths of the heart of God.

To know what God is like toward us, we need only study the life of Jesus.

There is no other God hidden

Christmas in Bethlehem is the pivot point of all history. The coming of Jesus Christ into the world is that event which the Old Testament anticipates and the New Testament commemorates.

God has become flesh and made his dwelling among us. And that same incarnate God made flesh, Jesus Christ, has ascended to the right hand of the Father. A human being has taken his place inside the glorious circle of the Trinity and has created a dwelling place

for you and me (John 14:2), where we too may take our place at the heavenly banquet table (Ephesians 2:6) provided for us before the creation of Adam.

At this Christmas season, let us share with our families, our friends and the strangers among us the love that is embodied in God's self-giving in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. Let us celebrate with joyous abandon and freedom, in the confident realization that we belong to God, that he is our loving and caring Father. Let us laugh, sing and hug as we give ourselves to one another as God has given himself to us in Jesus. Let us put the *good news* back into the gospel: God is not mad at us! God loves us! In Jesus, God has reconciled the world to himself, and he has shown his unfathomable love by sending Immanuel. *God is with us!* □

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There is no other God hidden behind the back of Jesus. The loving ways of Jesus are the loving ways of God, the God who is for us...

