

Sermon on Lord's Day 14
By Rev. Stephen t'Hart

Order Of Worship (Liturgy)

From 1984 Book of Praise

Psalm 118:1,6,7

Psalm 132:6,10

Hymn 13:1,2,3,6

Hymn 16:1,2

Psalm 118:8

Read: Luke 1:26-56.

Belgic Confession Article 18,19.

Text: Lord's Day 14

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Catechism makes it sound so clear, so simple. "The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God, took upon Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary, through the working of the Holy Spirit." That is what we believe concerning the incarnation, the Word becoming flesh.

Luke chapter 1 also makes it sound so clear, so simple. The angel explained it to Mary as follows: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." To which Mary responded, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word."

Clear and simple. Through the working of the Holy Spirit, the eternal Son of God, who continues to be true and eternal God, became a true man through the flesh and blood of his mother Mary. And yet, of all the theological debates in the history of the Christian church, one of the longest and hardest fought debates centred around the incarnation of the Son of God. (That word incarnation means "becoming flesh".) What happened, exactly? How did it happen? And what are the consequences of what happened when the eternal Son of God took upon himself the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary?

Today I wish to preach to you:

The true gospel of the incarnation of the Son of God.

1. What happened.
2. How it happened.
3. Why it happened.

1. What happened.

I am sure that most of you know that old Christmas Carol, "Away in a manger".

Away in a manger / no crib for His bed / the little Lord Jesus / laid down His sweet head.

It sounds nice. Sweet and lovely. But it is the third verse that generates the most discussion:

The cattle are lowing / the poor Baby awakes / But little Lord Jesus / no crying He makes.

What? No crying he makes? Did Baby Jesus cry? Actually, some people have said No. They say that crying is a result of sin. And since Jesus was not polluted by sin, he could not have cried. If He did cry, he wasn't God, and then He could not have been our Saviour.

Others would say, "Of course Jesus cried. Babies don't talk or write. They communicate by crying. Jesus became a human being and like his brothers in every respect and so He must have cried. If He didn't cry, He wasn't human, and then He could not have been our Saviour."

The deeper issue is how could Jesus be both Man and God at the same time, and what did this look like? How human was, or is, Jesus? How divine was He when He was on earth? What exactly happened when He became flesh? Did He start out in Mary's womb as a single cell? Did the Holy Spirit implant Jesus into Mary's womb in the sense that she became something like a surrogate mother? A conduit where Jesus grew up inside her and passed through her to enter the world? We know that with a normal birth, a sperm and an egg are involved. The husband fathers a child and the wife conceives. Now it is clear that Mary did not conceive a child in this manner. But did the Holy Spirit use an egg that Mary's body produced and see that this egg was fertilized by supernatural means so that in this way the Christ might be born? And going deeper, what about His soul? Did Jesus have a human soul? And then there are also questions about Christ's divinity. Did Christ retain His full divinity when He became man? Or did He perhaps give up some or all of His divinity, empty Himself of His Godhead? Did He stop being God in some ways?

These are important questions. How we answer them has a big impact on who we believe the Christ to be, how we worship Him, and how we are comforted by His incarnation.

But the Christian church has not always found it easy to comprehend what it means for the Son of God to become man, and what it means for Christ to be true man and true God at the same time generated a lot of controversy, especially in the first 500 years of church history. As men tried to explain what it meant for the Son of God to become man, a number of heresies, or false teachings, came forward. These heresies caused the church to go back to the Bible to understand the incarnation better, and that has had an impact on how our Catechism explains the conception and birth of Christ in Lord's Day 14, and also on what is written in articles 18 and 19 of the Belgic Confession.

One of the first false teachings about the incarnation was a heresy called docetism. In this teaching it was taught that Christ was not really a man; He just seemed like a man. So these people taught that Christ was God showing Himself in a human form – but He was not really like you and I. This teaching already began when the apostle John was still alive, and in response to it he wrote in 1 John 4:2,3 "By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God." And our Catechism says in answer 35 that Jesus took upon Himself "true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary."

A later heresy was the teaching of Arius. Arius was a bishop of the Egyptian city of Alexandria who died in 336 A.D. He taught that God the Son was at one point created by the Father. So Arius (and modern day Jehovah's witnesses follow him in this) taught that Jesus was created by God and therefore was not

truly God. It was against this teaching that our Catechism teaches that Jesus is “the eternal Son of God, who is and remains true God.”

Another church leader, a man called Apollinaris, divided Christ into having a body and a spirit. He taught (in about 361 AD) that Christ had a human body, but not a human mind or spirit. The body was from Mary, but the mind and spirit were of God and in that sense He was half God and half man. But when people thought this through, it was concluded that it can not be that Christ is half God / half man in this sense. For it was not just our human body that needed salvation, but our minds and spirits, or souls, as well. And so notice the wording of that other line in our Catechism in answer 35, “Thus He is also the true seed of David, and like His brothers in every respect.” Our Belgic Confession article 18 says even more, “He not only assumed human nature as to the body, but also a true human soul, in order that He might be a real man. For since the soul was lost as well as the body, it was necessary that He should assume both to save both.”

Some time later, in and around 428 A.D. a church leader called Nestorius tried to explain the human nature and the divine nature of Christ in another way. Nestorius taught that Christ was really two persons – a human person and a divine person. So he taught that you have to see Christ as something like water mixed with oil. He either did something in His human nature or in His divine nature. But the Bible does not describe Jesus in that way, and so our Catechism also stresses that He is “like His brothers in every respect, yet without sin.” We need to see Christ as One person, and can not separate His humanity from His divinity. We also read from the Belgic Confession, article 19, “We believe that by this conception the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature, so that there are not two sons of God, nor two persons, but two natures united in one single Person.”

At the same time as Nestorius, there was another teaching about the nature of Christ that was taught by a man called Eutyches. He taught that when the Son of God became man, His human nature mixed with His divine nature so that He became a new nature, and was neither fully God nor fully man but something in-between. Our Catechism also denies that possibility when it states that the Son of God “is and remains true and eternal God” and that as true seed of David, He is “like His brothers in every respect”. And article 19 of the Belgic Confession says that each nature of Christ, His divine and His human natures, retain their own distinct properties. Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man at the same time.

What then happened at the incarnation of the Son of God? Nothing less than the true and eternal God becoming true man. And that is what the angel told Mary in Luke chapter 1. In verse 30-33 He said, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

According to the words of the angel Gabriel, Mary would conceive Jesus in her womb. One of her eggs would be used, from which the Holy Spirit would bring Christ into the world. As the apostle Paul confirmed in Romans 1:3, Christ was “born of the seed of David according to the flesh.”

And yet, this would be no ordinary man, and this was no ordinary birth. He would not be the son of Joseph, but the Son of the Highest. He would be, it says in Luke 1:35, “that Holy One”, and “the Son of God”. True man and true God. And notice how Elizabeth confesses that in Luke 1:43, “But why is this

granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” While Jesus Christ is in every respect true man, He is not just a man. He is at the same time true God – and He must be worshipped as such.

And so when we confess that “He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary” we confess a Saviour who is one person but is fully and completely God and at the same time is fully and completely man. And we have to keep both of those facts in mind when we reflect on who our Saviour is.

There is a tendency today to treat Jesus rather casually. To consider Him as “one of the boys”. In an effort to make Him more real, more touchable, approachable, reachable, Christ’s humanity is sometimes stressed in down-to-earth terms. On the one hand it is good to remind ourselves of how human Jesus became. But He is not the friend down the street. He is our risen Lord and Saviour. He is, as Thomas confessed, “My Lord and my God!”

And on the other hand is a tendency to minimize the human nature of Christ. Either with songs about the Lord Jesus laying down His sweet head and not a cry does He make, or by separating Christ and Christianity from the real world. Sometimes there is not enough reflection on the fact that Jesus became a real person and lived in a real house in a real town at a particular time of the world’s history. And then it can happen that we lose the comfort in the fact that the eternal Son of God took upon Himself true human nature, becoming a flesh-and-blood person. And then going to church, reading the Bible and praying might become distantly removed from your every day life. Then it is as if somehow our worship of God is a spiritual matter that does not seem to help us when we are faced with the mess we experience in our daily lives. Then we don’t talk about our faith in everyday situations and in everyday language. And then we might also fail to see the full depth of the love that God has for this world. We would fail to see the wonder in the miracle of the incarnation, that God so loved this world, including you and me, that He sent His Son to become one of us. For that’s the true gospel of the incarnation. The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true God, took upon Himself true human nature. And as true God and true man, He became our Saviour and Mediator.

2. How it happened.

Many people today do not believe in the Virgin Birth of Christ. Some talk about discovering the historical Jesus as though this Jesus was different to the Jesus of the Bible and our faith. They think that it was impossible for Mary to have a baby without the baby having a human father. However we should confess with the angel Gabriel, “With God all things are possible.” (Luke 1:37) And if we accept the fact that God raised this same Christ from the dead on the third day, then it should not be to also accept the fact that God caused a virgin to become pregnant.

Actually, God had prepared His people for this miracle long before Christ was born. Abraham and Sarah received the miracle of a new life in Isaac when they were so old and dried up that there was no human chance of this happening. The very idea was enough to make Sarah laugh! The same thing happens with the birth of Samson and of Samuel. And then, six months before the angel came to Mary, God opened the womb of old Elizabeth and granted to her and Zachariah a son. And now the greatest miracle of all would come to pass: God’s own Son would be born of a virgin. The message is loud and clear: salvation comes only by the power of God!

But how did the incarnation of the Son of God take place? How was Jesus born? And how come He was without sin?

When Mary asked how it could be that she could become the mother of her Lord, the angel answered and said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you." And so the conception and birth of Christ can be seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. How exactly the Holy Spirit did this, we don't know. We do know for sure that the Holy Spirit was not some sort of male partner for Mary. The Bible never speaks of the Holy Spirit being the Father of Christ. In ways known only to God, Mary conceived the child Jesus "through the working of the Holy Spirit" and that is how the eternal Son of God took upon Himself true human nature. We can not explain this miracle further than that.

But there is more to be said about the role of the Holy Spirit. This picture of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary and the power of God overshadowing her brings us back to the beginning of time, when the Spirit of the LORD was hovering over the waters at the time of creation. Psalm 104:30 also speaks about the Holy Spirit being active in God's creative work. "You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; and You renew the face of the earth." It is therefore not surprising for us to learn that the Holy Spirit played such an active role in God's greatest work of all, the sending of His Son to take on true human nature.

And it is because of the work of the Holy Spirit that the Christ could be called in Luke 1:35 "that Holy One". Even though Jesus would be true man, the Holy Spirit would keep Him holy, free from the pollution of sin. And throughout His whole life on earth, the Lord Jesus would fulfil his office through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came upon Him when He was baptized at the beginning of His earthly ministry. Luke 4 tells us that He was filled with the Holy Spirit and went in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus drove out demons by the Spirit of God. And Hebrews 9:14 says that Jesus offered Himself up "through the eternal Spirit". And so having become one flesh with us, Jesus was equipped, strengthened and sustained to be our Mediator through the Holy Spirit. Through the power of the Spirit He withstood every temptation, lived a sinless life, performed miracles and went to the Cross to suffer and pay for our sins. And in that way, He became our Mediator. And so, because of the work of the Holy Spirit, with His innocence and perfect holiness, our Lord Jesus covers, in the sight of God, our sin, in which we were conceived and born. That brings us to our third point.

3. Why it happened.

The first Adam was not satisfied with the role that God had given him. He wanted to become like God. In Adam we all grasped and reached for that which was not ours. We wanted the divine likeness of God. And by our disobedience man, who had been created in the image of God, lost the true righteousness and holiness that God had granted, and by our disobedience we received death.

Jesus was and is God. But He did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped. He voluntarily took upon Himself the flesh and blood of humanity and so became the second Adam. He did so in order to free us from death and grant us a new life in Him. Because Christ, who is true God and at the same time true man, came into this world, He could become our Mediator, the One to take away our sin and guilt and remove it from God's sight forever.

But do you know the basic reason why this all happened? The real reason why Christ humbled Himself to take upon Himself the flesh and blood of his mother Mary? It is because you have a Father who loves you. Yes, He is a just God, and He can not stand sin and His wrath against sin is so great that He could not leave it unpunished. But the incarnation of the Son of God is the greatest demonstration of all that God loves us. God loved this world that He had made so much that He was prepared to send His only Son to be born of a woman to take away the curse that this world was under.

And now we have a Saviour who, with His innocence and perfect holiness, covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born. And the wonder of it all is that our Mediator and Deliverer is a true descendant of David. He partook of the flesh and blood of His mother Mary and is like His brothers in every respect. The eternal Son of God, who remains true God, became a flesh-and-blood person. He is of the same family as those whom He saves and makes holy. And he is not ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters.

The incarnation of Christ, that is, the Son of God becoming flesh, was physical and real. Remaining what He was, the Son of God became what He was not. Remaining true and eternal God, He became true man. Fully God and fully man at the same time. One Person. One Deliverer. One Mediator. For us and our salvation. Amen.