God in Time

by John M. Frame

On Christmas, we celebrate something quite wonderful: God entering our time and space. The eternal becomes temporal; the infinite becomes finite; the Word that created all things becomes flesh.

Incarnation

Oh, the mystery of it all! The one who knows all things (John 16:30, 21:17) must "grow in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). The all-sufficient one (Acts 17:25) must hunger and thirst (Matt. 4:2, John 19:28). The creator of all must be homeless (Matt. 8:20). The Lord of life must suffer and die. God in the flesh must endure estrangement from God the Father (Matt. 27:46).

In Jesus, God the Son, who knows the end from the beginning (Isa. 46:10), must watch his eternal plan unfold bit by bit, moment by moment. He grows from infancy, to childhood, to adulthood, responding to events as they happen. One time he rejoices; another time he weeps. From day to day, from hour to hour, the changeless God endures change. But God the Son incarnate is still God, still transcendent. As he responds to events in time, he also looks down on the world from above time and space, ruling all the events of nature and history..

Why did God enter time in Christ? Joseph named his baby Jesus, "because he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). It was the Father's love (John 3:16) that sent his Son, "that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." The Son of God took on the limitations of time, even death, so that we who deserve death can have life without limit, forever with God. He died in our place, that we might never die.

At the incarnation of Jesus, the angels stand amazed (Luke 2:14, Eph. 3:10, 1 Pet. 1:11-12). And at this event, non-Christian philosophers and religious teachers look on in bewilderment. In non-Christian systems of thought, it is impossible for ultimate reality to enter time and space. For the eastern religions, and for Plato, Aristotle, and the ancient Gnostics, the supreme being is impersonal, and it would lose its absoluteness if it came in contact with temporal reality. For other religions and philosophies, the supreme being, if it exists at all, is the temporal world itself, or an aspect of it. For them, "god incarnate" could be at most indistinguishable from the rest of the finite world.

Only in biblical religion is there a clear affirmation of a personal God distinct from the world he has made, who is able to come into that world without compromising himself and without losing himself in the world. As incarnate, he remains fully God, and he reveals his full deity, clearly, to his creatures, even amid all the mysteries I mentioned earlier. But this means that only in Scripture do we learn of a God who

loves us so much, so wonderfully, so powerfully, that he enters time on our behalf and stands strong to win God's battle in history against Satan and sin.

Theophany

The incarnation is wonderful, and absolutely unique. Only once did God become a man. He remains God and man forever (Col. 2:9, Heb. 7:24). He became man once, that we might be saved from sin once for all.

But the incarnation was not the first occasion on which God entered time. Scripture records other times when God met human beings in history: with Adam and Eve in the Garden, with Noah, with the patriarchs and Moses, with Isaiah in the temple, and so on. He appeared to Israel in the wilderness, in the cloud and the fire, for over forty years. His glory descended upon the tabernacle and the temple.

These events, that theologians call "theophanies" ("appearances" of God), are not incarnations. In them, God does not become flesh forever, to die for sins and rise to glory. But they are similar to the incarnation of Jesus in some ways. Certainly, they are mysterious. As in Jesus, God in theophany enters a historical process, a series of events. He becomes an actor in his own historical drama.

In Isaiah 6, God watches and listens to the angels sing his praises. He waits until they are done. Then he hears Isaiah's repentance, observes his symbolic cleansing (6-7), speaks to Isaiah, hears his reply (8) and continues the conversation (9-13). God acts in time, responding to each event as it comes, doing what is appropriate at each moment. He changes, in a way: for at one time he listens; at another he speaks. He changes, though he is unchangeable (James 1:17).

In Ex. 32, Israel rebels against God by worshipping a golden calf. God threatens to destroy them and replace them with a new nation, made up of Moses himself and his descendants (verse 10). But Moses intercedes: Lord, remember your promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God "relents" (verse 14). He does not destroy Israel, though he they do feel his wrath. Here we see how God in theophany accomplishes his eternal plan: through dialogue with a man. He first states an initial intention (a statement of what Israel actually deserves), but then, in response to Moses' intercession, promises mercy instead. Mercy was always his eternal plan; but he also planned to bring that mercy through human prayer, not without it. Before Moses' prayer, only judgment was in order. Through a give-and-take between God and Moses, the Lord works out his eternal intention.

In theophany, God, whose eternal plan brings all things to pass (Eph. 1:11), awaits events that he has foreordained. He accomplishes his will, not instantaneously, but by a process. He accomplishes his will in time by becoming an actor in the historical drama of which he himself is the author. He does not hasten to bring it to an end, as he well might. As in the incarnation, he responds to events as they happen. Once he speaks of grace and blessing, another time of judgment. He speaks and acts appropriately as he responds to each situation. In these ways, the mysteries of theophany are similar to those of incarnation.

Temporal Omnipresence

But even incarnation and theophany together do not exhaust the mysterious ways in which God comes into time. For in a sense, God is always in time, in history. We do not hesitate to speak of God's omnipresence in space: God is everywhere. We can never escape from his presence in blessing and judgment (Psm. 139:7-12, Jonah 1-2, Acts 17:28). But if God is present in space, he is also present in time. If he is always here, then he is always now as well.

Israel in Egypt knew that God was God of their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Ex. 3:6); but, groaning under their bondage, they may well have wondered if God was still their God, still able to fulfill his promises after 400 years of silence. I believe that the mysterious name "I AM" (Ex. 3:14) is in part a response to this concern. God says to Moses, "I will be with you" (3:12), not only in the burning bush theophany, but also when Moses stands before Pharaoh to demand his people's freedom.

He is still with us, now. Jesus said that he would be with us always (Matt. 28:20) in the Spirit (John 14:15-18). That means that God is still an actor in history, as well as transcending history. He is with me as I write, watching one moment pass into the next, responding appropriately to each event, bringing his sovereign Lordship to bear on every situation as it comes, hearing and responding to my prayers. But he is also looking down on the world from his transcendent, timelessly eternal viewpoint. He is both transcendent and immanent. As transcendent, he brings all things to pass according to his eternal plan. As immanent, he works in and with all things, moment by moment, to accomplish his sovereign will.

So Immanuel, God's Christmas name, is still appropriate. Jesus' incarnation, unique as it is, is in some respects like the way God relates to his world at all times, in all generations (Psm. 90:1). God is still an actor in our history, acting, responding, grieving, rejoicing. But he acts in history as the sovereign Lord of history.

The "open theist" movement of writers such as Gregory Boyd, William Hasker, Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, and John Sanders, believes that if we are to do justice to the give-and-take between God and his creatures in history, we must reject God's sovereign control over history, even his exhaustive knowledge of the future. Those conclusions do not follow logically, and they are not biblical. (I shall explore open theism in greater depth in my Doctrine of God, forthcoming from P&R Publishers.) Rather, these biblical pictures of God's actions in time should lead us to a heightened view of God's sovereignty. Our God is one who can and does accomplish his sovereign will, not only "from above," by his eternal decrees, but also "from below," by making all things work together for his good purpose (Rom. 8:28). Even God's apparent defeats in history are the outworkings of his eternal plan. In the very death of Jesus for our sins, God was acting in time to bring his sovereign purpose to pass (Acts 2:23).

So Christmas reveals in a wonderful way that God acts in time as well as above it. It shows us wonderfully how God relates to us, not only as a mysterious being from another realm, but as a person in our own time and place: interacting with us, hearing our prayers, guiding us step by step, chastising us with fatherly discipline, comforting

us with the wonderful promises of the blessings of Christ. Truly he is Immanuel, the God who is really with us, who is nonetheless eternally the sovereign Lord of all.