

Christian Doctrine

by Shirley C. Guthrie

Chapter Seven

"The Humanity of God"

Introduction

There is a sentence in the Gospel of John that has stopped readers cold for two thousand years: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Four words carry the whole weight of it — the Word became flesh. The eternal, almighty, self-sufficient God of the universe entered the world as a human being. Not disguised as one. Not visiting as one. Actually becoming one.

Chapter Seven of Christian Doctrine is Guthrie's extended reflection on what Christians call the Incarnation — the taking on of human flesh by the eternal Son of God. Guthrie approaches it not primarily as a puzzle to be solved but as a reality to be inhabited. His driving question is not simply how this could have happened, but what it means — for our understanding of God, for our understanding of ourselves, and for the way we live in the world.

God Is Not Who We Expected

The God Who Surprises Us

Guthrie opens the chapter by naming an uncomfortable truth: the Incarnation does not fit our instincts about God. Every natural human religion, every philosophical tradition, every common intuition about what ultimate divine power looks like points in the same direction — away from weakness, away from vulnerability, away from a feed trough in Bethlehem and a cross outside Jerusalem. If we had designed a God, we would not have designed this one.

"The Incarnation is the great scandal of the Christian faith — not because it is irrational, but because it contradicts everything we naturally expect from God. We expect power from above. We get a child born below. We expect glory. We get a stable."

This is not incidental. Guthrie insists that the surprise of the Incarnation is part of its meaning. God comes in a form that the powerful overlook and the proud dismiss — and in doing so, reveals that the power of God operates by entirely different rules than the power of the world. The Incarnation does not just tell us something about Jesus. It tells us something fundamental about the character of God.

The Humanity of God Is a Theological Statement

The title of the chapter is carefully chosen. Guthrie is not simply saying that God became human. He is saying that the humanity of God — God's willingness and capacity to enter fully into the human situation — reveals something that was always true about who God is. The Incarnation is not a departure from God's nature. It is an expression of it.

"When we say that God became human in Jesus Christ, we are not saying that God temporarily set aside his divinity to try something different. We are saying that the God who became human in Jesus is the God he always was — the God whose very nature is to give himself, to come near, to be for us and with us."

This reframes everything. The God we meet in the manger and at the cross is not a God acting out of character. He is a God acting perfectly in character. The Incarnation pulls back the curtain on who God has always been — a God whose love is not distant or theoretical but personal, costly, and present.

What the Incarnation Tells Us About God

God Takes the Human Situation Seriously

One of Guthrie's most important observations in this chapter is what the Incarnation says about how God regards human life. God did not look down at the human situation from a safe distance and send instructions. He entered it. He took on its limitations, its sorrows, its temptations, its mortality. This is not the act of a God who considers human life beneath him. It is the act of a God who considers human life worth everything.

"The fact that God became human tells us that human life — with all its ordinariness, its suffering, its embodied, time-bound, vulnerable reality — is not something God wanted to escape or transcend. It is something God wanted to share."

This has immediate pastoral weight. It means that no corner of human experience is outside the reach of God's solidarity. The exhaustion, the grief, the confusion, the physical pain — Jesus has been there. Not as an observer. As a participant. The God who calls us to trust him is the God who has walked the road himself.

God Is on Our Side

Guthrie draws out another implication that is easy to miss. The Incarnation is a declaration of whose side God is on. By taking on human flesh — by being born, growing up, living a human life under the conditions of human existence — God has permanently aligned himself with humanity. Not with a spiritual ideal of humanity, but with actual, particular, bodily human beings in their real circumstances.

"In the Incarnation, God does not observe the human condition from outside and pronounce judgment on it. God enters it, claims it, and in doing so declares that human beings in their full creaturely reality are the object of his love and the goal of his purposes."

What the Incarnation Tells Us About Humanity

Human Life Is Affirmed, Not Escaped

The Incarnation has something equally important to say about what it means to be human. Guthrie points out that a persistent temptation in Christian spirituality is to treat the physical, material, bodily dimension of human life as the problem — as something to be escaped, transcended, or at best tolerated on the way to a purely spiritual existence. The Incarnation rules that out completely.

"God did not put on human flesh reluctantly, as a necessary evil. He put it on as the fitting form for his self-giving love. In doing so, he told us once and for all that bodies matter, that the material world matters, that the whole of creaturely existence — not just the soul — is the arena of God's redeeming work."

This is a corrective the church needs in every generation. The Christian hope is not the escape of the soul from the body. It is the resurrection of the body. The Christian calling is not to flee the world but to serve it. The Incarnation tells us that God is interested in the whole of human life — not just the parts we consider spiritual.

Human Beings Are Taken Seriously by God

There is a dignity conferred on human beings by the fact that God became one of them. Guthrie does not pass over this lightly. The Creator of the universe chose to enter creation as a creature — to be born, to be fed, to learn to walk, to grow up in a particular family in a particular place at a

particular time in history. Whatever else this says, it says that human beings are not an embarrassment to God. They are the ones he came for.

"The Incarnation is God's statement about the value of human beings. Not human beings at their best, performing at their peak. Human beings as they are — needy, dependent, finite, mortal. These are the ones God chose to join. These are the ones he came to save."

The Incarnation and the Christian Life

A God We Can Actually Know

Guthrie draws a line from the Incarnation to the possibility of genuine relationship with God. An abstract, purely spiritual God — one who never enters the particularity of human experience — is a God we can only approach through speculation or mystical ascent. The God who became human in Jesus Christ is a God we can actually know, because he has made himself knowable in human terms.

"In Jesus Christ, God has given us a face. Not a symbol, not a concept, not an experience we have to manufacture through spiritual technique. A face — a particular human life that shows us, concretely and personally, who God is and what God is like."

This is why the Gospels matter so much for Christian faith. They are not merely historical records of a remarkable teacher. They are the testimony of people who encountered the human face of God and found in it everything they needed to know about who God is, what God wants, and how God acts toward human beings.

Incarnation Shapes How We Treat One Another

The chapter closes with a practical implication Guthrie considers inescapable. If God took human flesh seriously enough to inhabit it, then human beings — all of them, in all their particularity and vulnerability — must be taken seriously by the community that worships this God. The Incarnation is not only a doctrine to be believed. It is a pattern to be followed.

"A church that confesses the Incarnation cannot treat human beings as abstractions or as means to an end. It must deal with actual people in their actual circumstances — their bodies, their poverty, their loneliness, their physical and emotional needs — because that is precisely where God has chosen to be present."

Guthrie's Chapter Seven is ultimately an argument that the Incarnation changes everything — how we think about God, how we think about ourselves, how we think about one another, and how we think about the world we live in. The Word became flesh. And nothing has been the same since.

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Discussion Questions

Read through these questions before Wednesday if you can. There are no right answers to perform here — just honest thinking about a truth that changes everything. Write your initial thoughts and bring them with you.

On the Surprise of the Incarnation

1. Guthrie says the Incarnation contradicts everything we naturally expect from God — we expect power from above, and we get a child born below. What does your instinctive picture of God look like? How does the manger challenge or correct that picture?

2. Guthrie argues that the humanity of God — God's willingness to enter fully into the human situation — was not a departure from God's nature but an expression of it. What does that say about the kind of God we are dealing with? How does it change the way you think about God's character?

On What the Incarnation Tells Us About God

3. The Incarnation means God entered the human situation — its limitations, its sorrows, its physical vulnerability — rather than observing it from a distance. How does it affect your faith to know that God has not just seen your suffering from the outside, but has been inside it himself?

4. Guthrie says the Incarnation is a declaration of whose side God is on — that God has permanently aligned himself with human beings in their full creaturely reality. Who in your community most needs to hear that God is on their side? What would it look like for your church to embody that declaration?

On What the Incarnation Tells Us About Humanity

5. Guthrie pushes back against the tendency to treat bodies and the material world as the problem — something to be escaped on the way to a purely spiritual existence. Where do you see that tendency showing up in Christianity today? How does the Incarnation correct it?

6. The Incarnation confers dignity on human beings — God chose to become one of us, not at our best but as we actually are. How does that change the way you think about your own worth before God? How does it change the way you think about the worth of the people around you?

On the Incarnation and Daily Life

7. Guthrie says that in Jesus, God has given us a face — a particular human life that shows us concretely who God is. What do you learn about God specifically from the way Jesus lived — not just from his death, but from his daily life, his relationships, his choices?

8. Guthrie says a church that confesses the Incarnation cannot treat human beings as abstractions — it must deal with actual people in their actual circumstances. Where is San Pedro being called to do that more faithfully? Where are you personally being called to do it?