

“In This Way He Is Truly Our Immanuel”

An Exposition of Article Eighteen of the Belgic Confession.

Article 18: The Incarnation

So then we confess that God fulfilled the promise which he had made to the early fathers by the mouth of his holy prophets¹ when he sent his only and eternal Son into the world at the time set by him². The Son took the “form of a servant” and was made in the “likeness of man” (Philippians 2:7) truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses,³ except for sin⁴; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without male participation.⁵ And he not only assumed human nature as far as the body is concerned but also a real human soul, in order that he might be a real human being. For since the soul had been lost as well as the body he had to assume them both to save them both together.

Therefore we confess, against the heresy of the Anabaptists who deny that Christ assumed human flesh from his mother, that he “shared the very flesh and blood of children” (Hebrews 2:14); that he is “fruit of the loins of David” (Acts 2:30) according to the flesh; “born of the seed of David” according to the flesh (Romans 1:3); “fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary” (Luke 1:42); “born of a woman” (Galatians 4:4); “the seed of David” (Jeremiah 33:15); “a shoot from the root of Jesse” (Isaiah 1:11); “the offspring of Judah,” (Hebrews 7:14) having descended from the Jews according to the flesh (Romans 9:5); “from the seed of Abraham”—for he “assumed Abraham’s seed”⁶ and was “made like his brothers except for sin.” (Hebrews 2:16-17; 4:15) In this way he is truly our Immanuel—that is: “God with us.”

¹Gen 26:4; 2 Sam 7:12-16; Ps 132:11; Lk 1:55; Acts 13:23 ²Gal 4:4 ³1 Tim 2:5, 3:16; Heb 2:14 ⁴2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26; 1 Pt 2:22 ⁵Mt 1:18; Lk 1:35 ⁶Gal 3:16

God keeps his promises. The incarnation of Jesus Christ proves this assertion because this event lies at the center of what is truly the greatest story ever told. You know how that story begins. At the dawn of human history, God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden and commanded him not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But as we know, Adam ate from the forbidden tree, plunging the entire human race into sin and death. But even as God was pronouncing the curse upon Adam, Eve, and the serpent, God also promised to rescue Adam from his sin through the seed of the woman. The promise seed would be a biological descendant from Eve who would somehow redeem our fallen race from sin and restore us to the place of honor we once occupied before the fall. It will take a second Adam—one who obeys the covenant of works which Adam broke and who can redeem us from the guilt and power of sin to undo the consequences brought upon us by the first Adam. This brings us to the person in whom God fulfills his promises, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, who is truly our Immanuel, God with us.

Our confession treats the doctrine of election in Article Sixteen, the promise of redemption and the covenant of grace in Article Seventeen, and the incarnation of our Lord in Article Eighteen. The structure of our confession reminds us that all of these doctrines are necessarily connected. You cannot

talk about God's sovereign choice to save particular sinners without talking about God's promise to save his chosen ones and give them to the Son as his bride. We cannot discuss this covenant of redemption (the so-called covenant before the covenant) apart from a discussion of the covenant of grace, since this is the means by which God will actually save those whom he chooses. And we certainly cannot talk about the covenant of grace without talking about the mediator of that covenant, Jesus Christ, the one in whom God fulfills his promises.

As for the doctrine of divine election which demonstrates that God is merciful, not that we are good, God chooses to save a vast number of sinful men and women, chosen from among the sum total of Adam's fallen race. But while God chooses to save a multitude of sinners so vast they cannot be counted (Revelation 7:9), God also determines to leave the rest of humanity to suffer the just consequences of their sins. To put it another way, God's elect receive mercy, while those not chosen in Jesus Christ (the reprobate) will face divine justice. But God's decision to save this vast multitude of fallen sinners does not actually save those whom he chooses to save—the guilt of sin must be removed and a perfect righteousness which meets the demands of the covenant of works must be supplied. This is why God sent his Son who took to himself a true human nature to do what is necessary to accomplish his purpose.

As soon as Adam sins and is in hiding, trembling from fear, God comes to Adam and Eve with the word of promise found in Genesis 3:15—*"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."* It is the promised seed of the woman who will come and rescue Adam's fallen race, and who will serve as the mediator of the covenant of grace, through which God will deliver his people from the guilt of their sins. Under the terms of this gracious covenant, God will redeem all those who stand condemned under the covenant of works, which God made with Adam on behalf of the entire human race in Eden. All of these diverse themes come together in a single person, which brings us to the person and work of Jesus Christ, who is the promised seed of the woman and the only mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5).

Reformed Christians too often speak of important doctrines, like election, in the abstract. It is common to hear people speculate about election and predestination, the extent of the atonement, and so on, without making any connection between these doctrines and the person of Jesus Christ. But neither the Bible nor our confession, which summarizes the Bible's teaching about these things, allows us to do this. If we follow the biblical pattern, we cannot even mention the subject of election, without at the same time mentioning that we are chosen from before the foundation of the world in the person of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:4), who was himself chosen by the Father to be the redeemer of the world (Ephesians 1:10). We must never forget that the seed of the woman is not an "it," but a "who." We are chosen in Jesus Christ and redeemed through the work of Jesus Christ.

We must also carefully consider that the covenant of grace has a personal mediator, Jesus Christ, who is revealed to us in the Old Testament types and shadows through Moses' office as mediator of the covenant God makes with Israel at Mount Sinai, through the kingship of David's rule over Israel, and through the sacrifices offered to God by the priests of Israel. All of these things foreshadow the coming of God in human flesh. This is why we cannot talk about election and covenant, without at the same time focusing upon the Word made flesh. While distinct divine acts, election, covenant, and incarnation are inseparable and can only be explained and understood in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, who is "God with us."

This is why Article Eighteen, which deals with the incarnation, necessarily follows the discussion of election and the execution of God's plan to save those whom he has chosen through a covenant of grace.

When God decreed to save and chose Jesus Christ to be the mediator of the covenant of grace, God ensured that Jesus Christ—who as the second person of the Holy Trinity is fully divine and eternal—would take to himself a true human nature in the womb of the virgin. Before time began, God decreed to save sinners. Immediately after Adam fell into sin, God promised to save sinners. When the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son to accomplish all of the things necessary for our salvation (Galatians 4:4). To talk about election, God’s promises to his people, and the covenant of grace, is to talk about the person of Jesus Christ. The Word must become flesh if any of us are to be saved from the havoc wrought upon us by the first Adam.

Article Eighteen of our confession makes three primary points.¹ The first point builds directly upon Article Seventeen and the discussion of God’s plan of salvation in the form of a promise. When Adam sinned and fled trembling from God’s presence, God set out to rescue him, and to promise him that Jesus Christ would come to fulfill that promise. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the way in which God fulfills all of the promises made under the covenant of grace. Second, our confession takes up the nature and significance of God sending his eternal son in the likeness of sinful man. Here we ask the critical question as framed by famed Christian thinker Anselm in his book *Cur Deus Homo*—“Why the God man”? What is the significance of this? Finally, our confession deals with the error of the Anabaptists (*weder-doopers* in Dutch), many of whom at the time our confession was written affirmed that Jesus was fully God, while at the same time denying that in the incarnation Jesus took to himself a true human nature from the substance of the virgin.

The first part of Article Eighteen builds directly upon what was stated in Article Seventeen. Once the human race fell into sin, God set out to find Adam, preach the gospel to him and promise a full and final redemption. All of this is because God is merciful, not because we are worth saving. The incarnation of Jesus Christ’s does not take place in a vacuum—“look what God can do—take on a human nature, without ceasing to be God”—but in terms of fulfilling his promise to rescue all those he has chosen to save.

Recall, that in Article Seventeen, we read the following: “We believe that our good God, by his marvelous wisdom and goodness, seeing that man had plunged himself in this manner into both physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, set out to find him, though man, trembling all over, was fleeing from him. And he comforted him, promising to give him his Son, “born of a woman,” to crush the head of the serpent, and to make him blessed.” Article Eighteen, then, opens by stating how God fulfills this promise: “So then we confess that God fulfilled the promise which he had made to the early fathers by the mouth of his holy prophets when he sent his only and eternal Son into the world at the time set by him.” The promised seed is none other than Jesus Christ.

This is clear testimony of all of Israel’s prophets. The Old Testament is filled with various messianic prophecies, in which God’s promise to redeem his people are set forth with an amazing specificity.² In fact, there are some sixty-one major messianic prophecies regarding the coming of Jesus Christ found throughout the Old Testament, all of which are explicitly fulfilled by the coming of Jesus Christ as detailed in the New Testament.³ We have already seen that God’s promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis

¹ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 145.

² Most of these texts are found in Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, who does not refer to a number of the proof-texts listed in the confession, which are not as clear, and which have been dropped from more recent translations.

³ See, for example, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (Campus Crusade, 1972), 151-174.

3:15 is fulfilled when Jesus dies upon the cross. Jesus not only crushes Satan, but suffers for his people to bring about their redemption. Paul puts it this way in Colossians 2:13-15.

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

The serpent (and his demonic allies) were humiliated and defeated, even while the sinless son of God hung on the cross.

The number and breadth of these promises made in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Jesus Christ is simply amazing and is no doubt one of the greatest lines of proof of the Bible's inspiration and authority. In Genesis 12:3, God promises Abram, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." God's promise to Adam, is now fulfilled when God makes a covenant with Abraham, in which all the earth will be blessed. Likewise, in Genesis 49:10, when Jacob is dying, he reiterates the great theme of the promise. "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." Then, in the Book of Deuteronomy (18:15), the Lord informs the people of Israel, "the LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—" In 2 Samuel 7:12-13, David is told that, "when your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever."

The nations of the earth will be blessed through the seed of the woman. David's offspring will be both a king and a prophet. As the promise begins to unfold throughout the Old Testament, it is clear that God's promises will be fulfilled in a single person, who is the seed of the woman, who will be Israel's ultimate prophet, priest, and king, and who will also serve as the only mediator between God and man (cf. 1 Timothy 2:5). That this is Israel's expectation is clear from a prophecy such as Isaiah 59:20, "And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression," declares the Lord." God will do as he promises. He will send a redeemer from the line of Jacob and from the tribe of Judah, a redeemer who is David's son and holds David's scepter in his hand.

Israel's coming redeemer will not only be the prophet, the priest and the king, he will also be something more than any prophet, priest or king Israel has ever known. This coming one will, in fact, be God in human flesh. In Isaiah 9:2-7, the prophet describes this in the following terms.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and

forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

These words are truly amazing in their own right, but when we consider they were written some seven-hundred years before the birth of Jesus, we can see them for what they are—God fulfilling his promises to Adam, Abraham, Moses, and David.

But the prophecy of Isaiah 9 is not the only one in which Isaiah speaks of the coming redeemer as being God in human flesh. In Isaiah 7:14 we find this amazing prophecy—*“therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”* The coming one is not only supernaturally conceived, he will be God in human flesh. God is indeed going to come and visit his people, bringing them the long-anticipated salvation which he had promised. This is why the Old Testament perspective on redemption is one of longing, anticipation, expectation and hope.

When we come to the New Testament era—some four hundred years after the close of the Old Testament Canon—we immediately discover that something dramatic and completely beyond human expectation is taking place. Take for example, Matthew’s gospel, where we find the historical record of the fulfilment of a number of these ancient messianic prophecies. In Matthew 1:18-25, we read the familiar words,

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us). When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

God has kept his promise.

The balance of the New Testament data makes clear that the birth of Jesus fulfills all of these ancient messianic prophecies. The birth of our Lord was hardly accidental or insignificant. In Galatians 4:4-5, Paul indicates that the timing of the birth of Jesus Christ was according to the purpose of God. *“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”* With the birth of Jesus Christ the focus of redemptive history shifts from longing to excitement, anticipation becomes reality, expectation becomes fulfillment and hope becomes faith in the God of the promise. The hero of the story is now revealed.

From all the verses we have considered—and there are many more we could have considered—in the supernatural conception and quite natural birth of Jesus Christ, God fulfils his promise to Adam to send the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. But the birth of Jesus Christ also fulfills the promise God made to Abraham, to bless the world through one his biological descendants. This explains why the gospel of Matthew opens with a genealogical record, which traces our Lord’s ancestry back to Abraham through the line of Judah and the house of David. God keeps his promises.

The second main point made by our confession in Article Eighteen has to do with the nature and significance of the incarnation. Why did God send his eternal son, and what does this mean for us?

Our confession answers these questions as follows. Jesus Christ “The Son took the “form of a servant” and was made in the ‘likeness of man’ (Philippians 2:7) truly assuming a real human nature, with all its weaknesses, except for sin; being conceived in the womb of the blessed virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, without male participation. And he not only assumed human nature as far as the body is concerned but also a real human soul, in order that he might be a real human being. For since the soul had been lost as well as the body he had to assume them both to save them both together.” With this, we come to the remarkable truth of the incarnation. As one writer puts it, “the Son of God became the Son of Man, in order that the sons of men might become the sons of God.”⁴

This is truly the miracles of miracles! The son of God has come in the flesh to dwell with sinful men and women to save us from our sins. John puts it this way in verse 14 of the opening chapter of his gospel—“*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” In fact, it was Mary who bore the son of God, who asked the critical question, recorded in Luke 1:34—“*how will this be?*” Only to get an answer from the Angel Gabriel in the following verse: “*And the angel answered her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God.’*” This, then, is how the second person of the blessed Holy Trinity, the eternal Word became flesh. Speaking of the “Word becoming flesh” is probably a better way to speak than to say “God became man”—since the language of God “becoming man” may inadvertently communicate that Jesus stopped being God when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin.⁵

While the mechanics of the incarnation remain a mystery—Paul speaks of the incarnation in 1 Timothy 3:16 as such, “*great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory*”—the fact that the incarnation occurred is beyond all question. That Jesus is fully man and fully God is clearly taught in Holy Scripture. In the proof-text mentioned in the confession, Philippians 2:6-8, Paul either composes, or quotes from an early Christian hymn when he states of our Lord, “*who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*”

Jesus is the very image [*ikon*] of God, and at the same time is the very image of a servant. When we speak of Jesus taking the form of a servant, we mean that he took his human nature, body and soul, from the genetic substance of his mother. While Jesus remained fully God, he took to himself a true human nature—so human that he could cut himself shaving, so human that he could be hungry and tired, so human that he went to the bathroom. In fact, Jesus probably bore the physical resemblance to the members of Mary’s family.

In the incarnation, God does not turn into a man, nor does Jesus cease to be God. Jesus is both fully man and fully God. This, of course, brings us to the doctrine of the hypostatic union (the two natures of

⁴ Cited in Blanchard, *Gathered Gold*, 162.

⁵ Cf. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 333.

Christ—which exist in a single person), which is taken up in Article Nineteen of our confession. Suffice to say, in the incarnation, Jesus not only empties himself—laying aside his divine majesty while he undertakes his earthly mission to redeem us from our sins as the suffering servant—but he also willingly subjects himself to all the demands of God’s law, which is absolutely necessary if there is to be a righteousness which can justify sinners.⁶ Both of these—our Lord’s emptying himself of his divine majesty and his subjection to the law of God—are part of our Lord’s humiliation. The Word becoming flesh is an act of utter grace and mercy for one who had known the inter-Trinitarian love throughout eternity past, and who was now born into a world of sinners, waiting to put him to death!

Finally, our confession addresses the error of the Anabaptists (the *weder-doopers*), many of whom at the time our confession was written were teaching that Jesus was fully God, but that he did not take his human nature from his mother.

The error of the Anabaptists is described in our confession as follows: “Therefore we confess, against the heresy of the Anabaptists who deny that Christ assumed human flesh from his mother, that he “shared the very flesh and blood of children” (Hebrews 2:14). Recall that the two shoals through which the author of our confession must navigate are, on the one hand, Roman Catholicism, and, on the other, Anabaptism,. While rejecting Rome’s notion of dual church authority based upon Scripture and tradition, as well as Rome’s errors regarding justification and sanctification, DeBres must also affirm that the Reformed are orthodox in matters related to the Trinity and Christology. The Reformed are “catholic” Christians and reject all Trinitarian and Christological errors, which a number of prominent Anabaptists of that period openly embraced.

The person whose teaching to which DeBres is probably referring is Menno Simons, the founder of the sect of the Mennonites, and who was quite influential among the Dutch Anabaptists. Although his own tradition rejected his error, amazingly, Simons asserted that “there is not one letter to be found in all the Scriptures that the Word assumed our flesh . . .; or that the divine nature miraculously united itself with our human nature.”⁷ A number of the Dutch Anabaptists followed him in this and were asserting that God created the physical body of Jesus Christ within the womb of the virgin, just as Adam’s body had been created in Eden. This means that Mary was merely a divine incubator for the God-man supernaturally implanted inside her. She was not truly the mother of our Lord.

This error, of course, denies that Jesus took his human nature from his mother. If true, this means that Jesus Christ is not truly human and therefore, unable to redeem us from our sins.⁸ As one Reformed writer puts it while responding to this error: “if the Son of God had not accepted *our* flesh and *our* blood, there would be no connecting link between us and the last Adam. Not on *new* flesh or *new* blood, but on our flesh and our blood, the wrath of God abided, to be borne and removed by our Substitute, in all things like us, sin excepted.”⁹ Lest we forget, denying the humanity of Jesus, is every bit as serious an error as denying his deity. In fact, in John’s first epistle, denying the humanity of Christ is attributed to the Spirit of Antichrist (cf. 1 John 2:22).

⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 332.

⁷ Cited in Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.13.1, n. 2.

⁸ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 150.

⁹ Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, 150.

In order to refute this error, our confession simply lays out a series of biblical proof texts, all demonstrating that Jesus did indeed draw his humanity from the substance of his mother. We read of our Lord, “that he is ‘fruit of the loins of David’ (Acts 2:30) according to the flesh; ‘born of the seed of David’ according to the flesh (Romans 1:3); ‘fruit of the womb of the virgin Mary’ (Luke 1:42); ‘born of a woman’ (Galatians 4:4); ‘the seed of David’ (Jeremiah 33:15); ‘a shoot from the root of Jesse’ (Isaiah 1:11); ‘the offspring of Judah,’ (Hebrews 7:14) having descended from the Jews according to the flesh (Romans 9:5); ‘from the seed of Abraham’—for he ‘assumed Abraham’s seed’ and was ‘made like his brothers except for sin.’ (Hebrews 2:16-17; 4:15) In this way he is truly our Immanuel—that is: ‘God with us.’” From this impressive list of biblical texts, the gravity of the error of denying that Jesus took his human nature from his mother is easily seen. That Jesus took his human nature from his mother is the clear teaching of Scripture. If he didn’t, then he didn’t redeem fallen human nature.

As the structure of our confession makes plain, the incarnation of Jesus Christ marks the major turning point in redemptive history. Throughout the Old Testament, God’s people looked forward to the coming of the promised seed, that one in whom the nations of the earth would be blessed. The Old Testament saints hoped for, they anticipated, they expected, and they prayed for the very thing we celebrate on December 25th, the coming of the promised redeemer. Indeed, at the critical moment, God fulfilled his promise when the Word became flesh. That one whom God chose to save his elect, did indeed come to earth to redeem all those given him by the Father. God’s promise is fulfilled. In fact, in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God fulfills all of his promises made throughout the Old Testament. How do we know that God will keep his promises to us? We look back to see how he kept his promises to his people in the Old Testament.

As Christians, we look back upon the incarnation through the lens of fulfillment. We have seen God keep his word, fulfill his promise, redeem us from our sins and bless the nations of the earth. We must believe this to be true in order to be saved and we must confess this glorious truth before the unbelieving world around us. We must confess to all that Jesus Christ is the redeemer of the world. Jesus Christ is the only way to God. Jesus Christ alone is the true God come to earth. Jesus Christ alone is the life of men. His name is the only name through which God saves sinners. “In this way he is truly our Immanuel—that is: ‘God with us.’”