

The Incarnation as the Foundation for Missions

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Our view of how we do missions must begin with Scripture. Matthew 28:18-20 certainly is a foundational text on missions. Yet I propose we consider another text as well: John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Yes, I believe the fundamental model for missions is not the Apostle Paul but our Lord Jesus Christ, who while remaining fully God took on a full human nature and came to live among us in this world. This doctrine is known as the “incarnation.”¹

It is necessary to set out the parameters of orthodox understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation so that we are not led astray. The Son of God did not empty Himself of His divinity in order to be born as a human being.² In other words, He did not deny His identity as God in order to become human. He also did not transform into some sort of composite being, half human and half God. Rather, as the creed of Chalcedon, agreed to in 451, states, Jesus Christ is “Truly God and truly man . . . one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably. . .”³

The incarnation is our fundamental model for cross-cultural ministry. Our missions mandate is found in Scriptures like Matthew 28:18-20 which command us to keep going to all parts of the world until this age comes to an end with the return of Christ. Our missions goal is best described in Revelation 7:9-10 where we see eternal multi-lingual and multi-ethnic worship of God. The question is: how do we get from the command to the goal? Of course it is God who will do this, but He has granted us a part in this great enterprise; we see this in the Matthew 28 text, which is a command for us to go and make disciples of all peoples.

Furthermore, God provides for us some direction in how to participate. The Apostle Paul inserted into his letter to the Philippians a great hymn of praise to the wonder of the incarnation, Philippians 2:5-11. He introduces this powerful text to us with a direct command for us to follow the example

¹ Using the incarnation as a model for missions is not new. See Byang H. Kato, “The Gospel, Cultural Context, and Religious Syncretism” in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland*, J. D. Douglas, ed. (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, 1975), 1216-1223.

² The view that the Son of God emptied himself of his divine nature is known as the “kenotic theory.” The main problem with this view is that for the first 1,800 years of church history no one took Philippians 2:7 to mean that Jesus denied his divinity in order to become human. A better understanding of Philippians 2:7 is that Jesus, while always remaining fully divine, took on a human nature and during his life on earth he humbled himself by not always utilizing his divine prerogatives. See the discussion of this in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 550.

³ The Chalcedonian Creed, cited in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1169. The creed of Chalcedon is widely available both in printed theological texts and on the internet.

of Jesus incarnated. The hymn closes in verses ten and eleven with yet another glimpse of magnificent multi-cultural worship. Jesus Himself also connects the incarnation to our mission when said, “As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). In fact, the majority of New Testament texts that speak of “sending” refer to Jesus being sent by the Father via the incarnation to this world (at least twenty-four times in the Gospel of John alone). The very concept of “sending” is rooted in the incarnation.

Practical implications

The incarnation has at least ten implications for how we do missions:⁴

1. Loyal obedience and utter dependence: Jesus often said his mission on earth was to do the will of His Father in heaven. Gospel references of his frequent recourse to prayer indicate His dependence upon His Father. We must likewise respond to our God with loyal and joyful obedience and utter dependence on Him. This means He sets the agenda and gets the credit for all we do and are. As we respond with obedience and dependence we enter into his joy. Our sovereign King demands nothing less.
2. Acceptance: Jesus, by coming to us, accepted us as worthy of His attention. We must consider the local people in our assigned place of ministry to be valuable human beings made in the image of God. As such, they deserve our respect despite any feelings of disgust or revulsion we may have towards certain customs or beliefs in their culture.
3. Identification: Jesus chose to become one of us. We are called to identify with the people. There are limits to this, since we cannot arrange to be born into the culture as Jesus was. Yet we must strive to be among the people as much as we can. At the very minimum this means we work hard at learning the language of the people. This does not mean we erase our own cultural identity. Rather we become able, while remaining who we are, to enter in to and engage the local culture in such a way that the local people can understand us.
4. Commitment for the long haul: Jesus did not come merely for a visit. Instead, He spent His whole earthly life among us. There is a legitimate place for short-term missions, but it cannot replace those who go to live among a people for years, even decades. In order for a missionary to effectively communicate the Gospel to the local people she or he must attain some level of fluency in their language. Language learning takes time and a willingness to be with the people.⁵
5. Learning: Jesus situated himself to learn from those not worthy to teach Him. The people in our ministry setting may well be in dire need of the Gospel, but if we begin too soon to slip

⁴ Four of these categories (acceptance, learning, humility and service) are borrowed and expanded from Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood: Serving the World in Christlike Humility* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), a book I highly recommend to anyone in ministry, whether in their home culture or in a cross-cultural setting.

⁵ An example of the length of time to attain fluency is that of me and my wife. At the end of our first four-year term we were just beginning to be fluent in the language of the central Philippines, Cebuano.

into the “teacher” role, we may well lose any long-term opportunity to see the Gospel effectively transform the people. If we humbly place ourselves in a learner mode, then every local of any age, from child to elder, can teach us. If we allow this to take place, appreciation among the locals will win us a hearing.

6. Humility: Jesus showed gentleness where He put others ahead of himself. For us this means we adopt an attitude of serving others because we consider their interests ahead of our own. This may require us to give up our own agenda for ministry as we encounter the reality of needs among the people. This also means that we avoid thinking of our service, our teaching, and our methods as indispensable to God’s work.
7. Service: Jesus came to serve others. “Is it not remarkable that we know more about the interruptions in Jesus’ busy schedule than we know about anything else he said or did?”⁶ Jesus had a mission to accomplish but He allowed frequent intrusions into His life because He valued each person He encountered. This is an important lesson for us when we find ourselves too “busy” to relate to the local people.
8. Suffering: Jesus suffered with us, taking on our human pains and limits. Suffering is a normal part of our lives as believers in this fallen world. How we respond to trials and setbacks is a powerful testimony to our real belief system, and the local people will want to know how we deal with adversity. This implies some openness on our part to share some of our struggles.
9. Perseverance: Jesus did not turn away from the task He set out to accomplish. We must always keep in mind the larger calling we have to develop, empower and release local believers for Kingdom ministry. Sometimes we will need to turn down opportunities to do “good” things in order to have energy and time for the “best.” Also, we need to keep ourselves healthy enough (physically, emotionally, intellectually, relationally) to be able to go the distance in cross-cultural ministry.
10. Love: Jesus came to us because of His love for us despite our faults and sins. We must allow the love God has for us and the love he engenders in us for the local people to motivate us. Our emotional awareness of these loves will vary from day to day, but we must always come back to both as basic driving forces for why we are serving cross-culturally.

Of course we cannot follow the model of the incarnation completely. We are not able to begin our ministry by being born into a new culture as Jesus did. We must realize the limits in our ability to identify with the local people: we can never completely become one of them, in contrast to Jesus who did take on a complete human nature while remaining completely divine. Our limited ability

⁶ Jonathan J. Bonk, “Toward Common Sense Missiology: A Response,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 38.1 (January 2002), 23.

here is illustrated in the case of a missionary couple who was dedicated to living incarnationally among the poor. When their newborn fell seriously ill, they took him back to America for treatment. The locals did not have that option for their sick children.⁷ Did this couple fail to fulfill incarnational missions? No, rather they discovered that there are legitimate limitations to identifying with those to whom we minister.

Yet the model of Jesus can and should form our approach to missions. We must practice acceptance of the local people to whom we are sent. We should identify with them as much as we can, which includes learning their heart language. Missions is a long-term endeavor which often requires long years of preparation, just as Jesus himself began his ministry only after thirty years. This does not mean there is no place for short-term involvement, but by its nature identifying with a people means living with them, not merely visiting them. As missionaries we must assume the posture of students, which places the local people in the honorable role of teachers. Demonstrating humility and serving effectively often require more time than is available in a few days or weeks. We may well be called to endure suffering with the local people, an opportunity that short-termers often miss. Bringing the Gospel to another culture calls for perseverance. And finally all we do must stem from love of God and love for the people, who are made in God's image even as we are.

There have been some good correctives and cautions offered to the incarnational model for missions.⁸ Some who have attempted to implement the incarnation as a missions model have done so from an ill-informed theological understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation.⁹ Some have said merely being with the local people, merely identifying with them, is enough.¹⁰ J. Todd Billings has noted in an excellent article that Jesus did not come merely to be with us, but He came to do something for us: accomplish redemption. So we missionaries are not called to deny our cultural identity (which Jesus also did not do), nor are we called to merely live among the local people as one of them, something we can never really accomplish anyway. Rather, we come to serve and learn and befriend the local people in order to share with them the transforming Gospel.

⁷ Harriet Hill, "Incarnational Ministry: A Critical Examination" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 26.2 (1990), 198.

⁸ See Hill, "Incarnational Ministry" and Ken Baker, "The Incarnational Model: Perception of Deception?" *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 38.1 (January 2002), 16-24.

⁹ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003) is one popular work which makes several fundamental errors in attempting to use the incarnation as a missions model. The most egregious is their discussion of Jesus as a "200-percent person" which violates our orthodox understanding of Jesus as one person with two natures. See J. Todd Billings, "Incarnational Ministry and Christology: A Reappropriation of the Way of Lowliness," *Missiology* 32 (April 2004), 187-201, and for specific critique of Lingenfelter and Mayers, n. 18, p. 200.

¹⁰ See Martha Th. Fredericks, "Kenosis as a Model for Interreligious Dialogue," *Missiology* 33 (April 2005), 211-222 and the critique of Orlando E. Costas, *Christ outside the Gate: Mission beyond Christendom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982) by Billings, "Incarnational Ministry and Christology."