

How is Jesus the focus of incarnational living?

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Incarnational ministry

'Incarnational ministry', 'incarnational mission', 'incarnational living', 'incarnational rather than attractional', a network of Baptist church planters called Incarnate and now a Salvation Army urban forum called 'Incarnate' – incarnational language seems to be everywhere at the moment.

This language is not new, of course, but on emerging church blogs, in academic articles on missiology, in urban mission circles and in popular books on church and mission the term 'incarnational' appears as often as 'kingdom' did in the previous generation. And if we are not very careful, 'incarnational' will end up like 'kingdom' – as a buzz word that shows we are cool and contemporary, but about which we have rather fuzzy ideas.

We are going to be exploring the implications of incarnational ministry in various ways in this forum, so hopefully by Thursday we will have a clearer understanding of what we are talking about and be better equipped to work through the challenges of incarnational living in practice.

My task this morning is to investigate the connection between incarnational living and Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God. But first let me flag up the kinds of things that are often associated with 'incarnational' language. I don't want to pre-empt our discussions and conclusions or intrude too much on other sessions, but I think we need to start with some idea of what incarnational living might involve if we are to ask how Jesus can be the focus of this.

So, in no particular order, here are some of the things people seem to mean when they talk about incarnational mission and ministry:

Living locally, rather than engaging in mission from a safe distance

Participating in the community, rather than remaining aloof from it

Affirming and valuing all we can in the local culture
Being self-aware and sensitive to our own assumptions and prejudices

Believing that God is already at work in the community and discovering how to join in

Concentrating on relationships rather than programmes

Interpreting mission as 'go to them' rather than 'come to us'

Operating from the grass roots rather than from positions of power

Embodying the gospel through small groups that infiltrate society

Doing things with rather than for the community

Communicating the gospel in contextual language and images

Communicating the gospel through deeds as well as words

Understanding faith and discipleship as whole-life activities

Rejecting sacred/secular dualism and refusing to see church as a separate sphere

Not knowing in advance what our ministry will lead to

Regarding mission as two-way, so that we learn as much as we teach

Not extracting converts from their culture but equipping them to live within it as followers of Jesus

Operating as 'salt' and 'leaven' in the community

Working for cultural transformation from the inside rather than the outside

As the forum continues we may want to add other elements to this list. We may also want to revisit it and question whether some of these things really do equate to incarnational living. But if some of these things are roughly what we mean by incarnational living, how is Jesus the focus of such attitudes and behaviour?

The Incarnation and Missio Dei

Another buzz word (or phrase) we need to be careful not to throw around too carelessly is *missio Dei*: the conviction that mission starts with God rather than us, that we are invited to participate in God's cosmic plan to reconcile all things to himself, that the church does not have a mission but God's mission has a church. *Missio Dei* points us not only to the cosmic scope of God's purposes but also to the means by which God works.

The focal point of *missio Dei* is the incarnation – the Word becoming flesh, Emmanuel (God with us), God embodied, God moving into our neighbourhood, God becoming one of us, Jesus the image of the invisible God, fully human and fully God. Over the past few weeks we have celebrated this wonderful mystery again, re-reading the stories of the birth of Jesus and singing familiar carols – some of them glorious, others sentimental pap and a few frankly heretical.

But once Christmas is over evangelicals tend to rush ahead to Easter. The incarnation is a necessary precursor to the crucifixion and resurrection: Jesus had to be born so that he could die, and he had to be fully human and fully God so that his death could save us. But some other traditions reflect more deeply on the incarnation. Some see this as the central and decisive act of God, the means by which God saves us. Others pay more attention to the life of Jesus – what this life teaches us about the nature of God, how the kingdom of God draws near to us in the person of Jesus, what the life of Jesus shows us about being truly human and in what ways Jesus is an example we are to follow.

The language of 'incarnational living' draws on these traditions that pay more attention to the life of Jesus, and the practices of incarnational living are often connected more or less closely to the example of Jesus. I say 'more or less closely' because Jesus can function as the inspiration for incarnational living in two ways, which are not always clearly defined or differentiated:

For some, it is the fact of the incarnation that is crucial: because God's mission was advanced through incarnation, incarnation is the principle we should adopt and incarnational living means we embrace the practices we mentioned earlier.

For others, it is the nature of the incarnation that is crucial: Jesus as the Incarnate Word of God calls us not just to operate incarnationally in some generic way but to follow his example, be filled with his Spirit and represent God to others in the way that Jesus did.

Not everyone, though, has been persuaded that either of these positions is legitimate. Can we use incarnational language both about Jesus and about his followers without diluting its meaning, threatening the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of God and developing some kind of messiah-complex? Can we really justify using incarnational language to explain our decision to shop at Kwik Save rather than Waitrose in order to identify with the local community, when the same language is used to describe Jesus not claiming equality with God but emptying himself and taking the form of a servant in order to redeem humanity?

There are, however, some biblical encouragements to extend the language of incarnation in this direction. Jesus told his disciples 'as the Father has sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21): does this mean only that the disciples are missionaries (sent ones) as Jesus had been or that they are to continue and extend his mission and ministry? Paul refers to the church as the 'body of Christ' on many occasions – his favourite image for the church – and uses language that indicates the ascended Christ is the head of this body, directing and energising its activities (Ephesians 4:7-16 and elsewhere). There are also theological reasons to pursue this: if we are made in the image of God and Jesus is the image of the invisible God, if Jesus is not only the Son of God but also the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45), if Jesus has sent his own Spirit upon the church, the language of incarnation may be applicable to the church as well as to Jesus.

So I suggest we can extend incarnational language to apply to the Christian community as well as to Jesus, but that we need to bear in mind three caveats:

The 'body of Christ' imagery is just that – imagery. If we take this too literally we are in danger of glorifying the church, forgetting our status as 'recovering sinners' and losing our capacity to call the church to account when it behaves in ways that are anything but Christ-like. In many communities the church is the problem, not the solution – which was never true of Jesus.

This imagery always refers to the Christian community rather than an individual. Incarnational living has implications for individuals, but incarnational status can only be ascribed to the church. If we apply this to ourselves as individuals we not only move beyond biblical bounds but risk developing a messiah-complex.

The language used of Jesus as the image of the invisible God is far more exalted than anything we could

legitimately apply to the church. 'For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross' (Colossians 1:19-20).

The Incarnation and Christendom

But if we are in danger today of using incarnational language too glibly and threatening the unique status and mission of Jesus, for much of its history the church in Europe has fallen into the opposite temptation of losing touch with the person and life of Jesus as the model for mission and ministry.

Those of you who know me know that I tend to blame the 'Christendom shift' for most of the ills of the church in western culture.² The Christendom shift was what happened in the fourth and fifth centuries following the adoption of Christianity by Constantine I and his successors as the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the nominal Christian culture that came to dominate Europe, the church colluded with status, power, wealth and even violence. There was massive church growth at the expense of Christian discipleship.

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, in their influential book, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, suggest that in the Christendom era the church operated in 'attractational' mode and that in post-Christendom we need to move away from this into 'incarnational' mode.³ Much as I appreciate these authors and this book, I want to argue that Christendom can actually be interpreted as an attempt at incarnation.

Christendom was a continent-wide and millennium-long attempt to incarnate the gospel into the various societies and cultures that emerged from the ruins of the Roman Empire. The Bible was translated into its many languages, the gospel was expressed using images that made sense to people in a feudal and hierarchical society, the parish system ensured that everyone had access to a local church and great efforts were made to influence and transform all aspects of society. Many of the features of incarnational living we looked at earlier – though not all of them – can be identified in Christendom.

So what went wrong? Why has Christendom unravelled during the past three centuries? Why do many of us look back with horror and dismay at much of what Christendom did and stood for? I suggest that there were two major defects:

Christendom over-emphasised one aspect of

incarnation at the expense of another.

Christendom lost touch with Jesus, the Incarnate One.

Incarnation has two equally important dimensions. Jesus was incarnate because he fully identified with humanity, because he became a real human being, a first-century Jewish carpenter who spoke Aramaic, attended the synagogue, went to parties, laughed and wept with his friends, was angered by injustice and suffered at the hands of the political and religious authorities. But Jesus was also incarnate because he embodied God, taught and demonstrated the ways of God's kingdom, challenged his contemporaries to embrace the values of God's kingdom and brought the healing and liberation of God to people.

Incarnation means representing God and identifying with our culture. Andrew Walls, the historian of mission, argues that authentic mission always involves two principles: what he calls 'the indigenising principle' and 'the pilgrim principle'.⁴ The missionary task is to translate and incarnate the gospel into every culture on earth so that an indigenous church is planted and can reproduce itself. But it is also to represent and embody the story and purposes of God, challenging dimensions of culture that are not consistent with these.

Christendom was very strong on the indigenising principle but very weak on the pilgrim principle. The gospel was inculturated but also compromised. The church identified with its surrounding culture but failed to challenge it adequately. The Christendom shift meant the domestication of the church rather than the transformation of the empire. We must be very careful we do not slip into a similar distorted understanding of incarnation. We need to identify with our social and cultural context, affirm all we can and avoid unnecessary dualism, but we need also to offer and live out counter-cultural values rooted in the story that shapes us as the people of God.

Why was Christendom weak on the pilgrim principle? Because it lost touch with Jesus and marginalised his life and teaching. There is plenty of evidence for this in the fourth and fifth centuries:

Preachers increasingly drew on Old Testament texts rather than the Gospels.

The Sermon on the Mount was spiritualised or relegated to the future rather than applied to present-day discipleship.

The great creeds of the church move straight from the

birth of Jesus to his death, ignoring his life and teaching ('born of the virgin Mary...suffered under Pontius Pilate').

In Christian art Jesus is no longer represented as in the first three centuries as the good shepherd but as a remote and imperial figure.

In Christendom, the divinity of Jesus was stressed far more than his humanity. Jesus was admired and worshipped rather than being followed. Christendom was an incarnational strategy that marginalised the Incarnate Jesus. If we are to be committed to incarnational living we need both to identify in costly ways with our context and to identify in costly ways with the life and teaching of Jesus.

Jesus the Focus

And so, at last, to the title of this paper: how is Jesus the focus for incarnational living? In what ways is Jesus our example and our inspiration as we seek both to embody the gospel and to identify with our neighbours? Rather than trying to offer a comprehensive answer, let me throw out some suggestions:

Jesus asked many questions but gave few answers. Even when people asked him questions he tended to tell a story, ask another question or give an oblique answer. Is incarnational living about provoking questions rather than giving answers?

Jesus rejected the devil's temptations to take shortcuts, to impress people and to impose the kingdom rather than inviting people into it.⁵ Is incarnational living about gentle and winsome witness rather than dynamic action?

Jesus said different things to different people. Although his ministry clearly had some central themes – especially the arrival of God's kingdom – he used many different images and dealt very differently with rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, Pharisee and tax collector. Is incarnational living about improvisation rather than techniques or strategies or being purpose-driven?

Jesus attracted people by who he was and what he did but he did not make it easy for people to follow him. He was not very seeker-sensitive. Is incarnational living about being attractive rather than attractional, embodying the gospel in ways that both attract and repel people so that they count the cost of following Jesus?

Jesus knew that he could opt out of incarnational living. Not only were the devil's temptations very real, but he could call on legions of angels to rescue him at

any point.⁶ Some people argue that incarnational living that is chosen is inauthentic, because unlike those around us we can choose to move, but maybe the opposite is true. Is incarnational living only possible if it is freely and persistently chosen?

I'm fully aware that these five suggestions are very selective. I could have chosen other aspects of the life and ministry of Jesus. You probably would have. And selectivity is one of the issues we face as we consider how Jesus can be the focus for incarnational living.

Even if we avoid the Christendom trap of trying to be incarnational without focusing on Jesus, which Jesus do we focus on? What aspects of his life do we regard as examples or give most attention to? Healing the sick, driving out demons, washing his disciples' feet (the only place in the Gospels where the word 'example' is actually used⁷), castigating the scribes and Pharisees, advocating enemy-loving, withdrawing to pray, changing water into wine, having compassion on the crowds, and so on? How do we avoid reading back our prejudices and preferences into the Gospels?

This is one of the weaknesses of the WWJD ('what would Jesus do?') approach. We are likely to answer this question in ways that cohere with our understanding of Jesus rather than really engaging with his story.

Alternative acronyms such as WWJB ('who would Jesus bomb?') or interpretations of WWJD ('what would Jesus drive?') may be humorous spoofs but they should make us uneasy. How easily can we co-opt Jesus to justify our convictions – even our convictions about incarnational living – rather than being shaped and guided by his life and teaching?

If we are going to work with such acronyms, what about:

WDJD: 'what DID Jesus do?' At least this invites us to work a bit harder at the contextual and incarnational task, wrestling with the biblical text, reflecting on the context and asking the Holy Spirit to help us understand the implications for us today.

WWJL: 'what was Jesus like?' WWJD can result in wooden interpretations as well as woolly thinking, especially if we are searching for proof texts. Maybe we need to think more about who Jesus was – his character, motivation, priorities, vision and values. Maybe incarnational living is more to do with who we are than what we do, more about reflexes than rules.

One final point. Jesus was utterly unremarkable for 90% of his life. Only in the final three years of public

ministry did he become extraordinary. Nobody in Nazareth, except Mary, knew that he was anyone special. The Gospels report that his family and neighbours were taken completely by surprise when he 'came out' as the Son of God.⁸

So is incarnational living largely mundane, run-of-the-mill, unexceptional, but punctuated by moments or seasons when God is more evidently at work? After all, if we are made in the image of God and Jesus came to restore that image that has been marred and obscured by

sin, incarnational living that takes its reference from Jesus is surely about living a fully authentic human life.

Maybe only God can live a fully authentic human life. But the incarnation of Jesus, when we interpret this in light of his life and teaching, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, demonstrates that God wants to live that fully human life through us – not just as individuals but as the body of Christ of whom Jesus is the Head. Which means that incarnational living is a calling, a choice and a challenge but ultimately a gift.

- 1 Basic community development principles and practices have much in common with incarnational living.
- 2 See Stuart Murray: *Post-Christendom; church and culture in a strange new world* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004) and *Church after Christendom* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).
- 3 Michael Frost & Alan Hirsch: *The Shaping of things to Come* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 8-22.
- 4 Andrew Walls: *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 7-9.
- 5 Matthew 4:1-11.
- 6 Matthew 26:53.
- 7 John 13:15.
- 8 See Mark 3:21; Luke 4:22.