

# Incarnational Mission

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## Introduction

Mission is on the up. Increasingly Christian conversation is coming round to mission and what form it takes in a changing world. This is not to say that the desire for the growth of the kingdom of God is a new idea by any stretch of the imagination. Even in our recent history the 80s was the EA's decade of evangelism and the 90s was the decade of church planting. However it seems now that Christians are beginning to consider that maybe evangelism and church planting are not quite what they once were in the West, particularly where the culture is broadly accepted to be undergoing a huge transition. Hence the conversations concerning mission are beginning to consider that the nature of the churches engagement with the world needs to be rethought in a way that makes it both *appropriate* and *biblical*. The purpose of this paper is to add into this conversation by exploring the concept of "incarnational mission", and to consider the implications of such an approach for our churches.

## The Context of Our Mission

In my experience, the church's engagement with the world, if you will allow me to caricature slightly, has been all about 'evangelistic activity'. This activity is done by the enthusiasts in the church who are bold enough to leave the safety of the Church and move out into the big-bad world, like someone jumping off a lifeboat hoping to drag people out of the water by persuading them of what a terrible situation they are in. When these brave souls return to safety they are quizzed about 'how they got on out there' and how many got saved! This has employed such mechanisms as door knocking, street evangelism, leaflet drops and tracts. Today we have generally moved beyond this to other ways of performing this interaction. Moves such as acts of kindness, social action, cell church, seeker friendly church, purpose-driven church all seek to blur those hard edges that separate the church from the world and provide more authentic engagement. They often seek to equip and empower ordinary Christians to have genuine relational encounters with people. This is a fantastic and welcome development.

However, it is possible to change the 'mechanisms' while holding to basically the same concept. This concept, I suggest, is that of Christendom. Christendom was born out of the marrying of church and state with Constantine in the fourth century AD. For the past 1700 years in the West the church has basically had the position of being state endorsed and therefore central and fundamental to the structure of society. There were many radical groups within those years that sought to challenge this arrangement and/or the resulting apathy in the wider culture. Those groups often worked to define a true Christianity versus a nominal Christianity, this is true, I suggest, of the Charismatic movement. Phrases such as "born again" and "Spirit filled" added to

the word “Christian”, serve to provide a further definition on what it really means to be a Christian (see fig 1).

This “True Christianity” is a strongly bounded set with the intentional purpose of providing an alternative to the mainstream. Hence this works on a separatist model, and focuses on creating an alternate world founded on their “True Christian” basis. In that sense it is actually *based* on Christendom thinking. Mission in this mindset is to persuade people to come to us, enter and experience our alternate world through the satisfaction of our “True Christian” entrance criteria (born again, spirit filled or whatever). It seems to me that this way of thinking is appropriate in a nominal Christian society. However, what happens when Christianity is no longer the dominant worldview, when the wider culture is no longer nominally Christian? *What happens when the wider culture does not value the Christian voice just because it is Christian?* It requires a change in the posture of church.

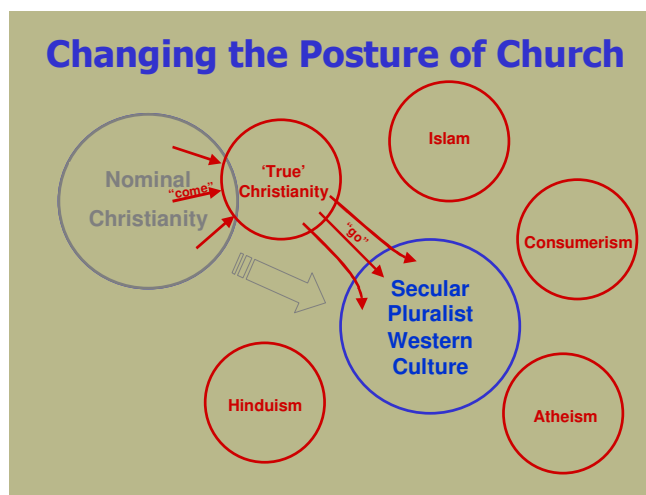


Figure 1 – Changing the Posture of Church

The movement of Western culture from being nominally Christian in Christendom to being a secular, pluralist society requires the church to change and to move. It requires a distinctive voice that is appropriate and is heard amongst all the other voices and influences. It requires that the church gives up a “come to us” posture and whole-heartedly embraces a “go to them” posture. Hence the church finds itself in the position of cross-cultural mission within its own neighbourhood<sup>1</sup>. The talk around mission within Christian circles then is highly appropriate, as we seek to discover appropriate ways of “going to them”. The “incarnational mission” paradigm being investigated in this paper, I believe, captures the nature of this change in posture. It is both founded in the nature, character and action of God and appropriate to the multi-cultural, post-modern, post-Christendom, pluralist Western world in which we live.

### **The Origin and End of Mission: God’s Mission – Our Mission**

Any talk of mission must always start with God. Mission is not our work, nor our idea; rather it is rooted in God’s prior activity and movement. In fact it would be right to say that mission is an

<sup>1</sup> See Cray, *Mission-Shaped Church*, 2004, 90

attribute of God's character<sup>2</sup>. God's action of mission in reaching out to a world that has rejected him is shown in God's self-giving movement and acts of love. Hence any kind of mission roots itself firmly in the love of God: "For God so loved the world that He sent..."<sup>3</sup>. This, I believe is no small statement, given that historically love has not always been the motivation in the churches engagement with the world. You don't have to go back as far as the Crusades and the Spanish conquistadors to find the church's attitude more characterised by judgement, control and defeat, as opposed to love. Therefore we will first look at the narrative of God's loving action in the world that resulted climactically in the Incarnation<sup>4</sup>.

It is relevant to start our study, as with much of theology, with the creation story in Genesis. Genesis 1-3 tells of God's creative action in the world. It tells of God's love for his creation, it was "good". God was not content however with creation after 5 days, even with the plants, land, water, bird and animals. On the sixth day he created humanity. Not just as a pinnacle of his creative work, but as co-worker and a friend. Humanity was to be God's image bearer in creation. They were to run and manage the rest of creation as the Creator wanted. Humanity, as God's image, represented God to creation. They were not owners of creation but stewards of it.

Hence humanity has a mission from God to steward creation as the creator would wish, a mission to fill the earth with the God's image for creation. This mission could be broken down into three areas<sup>5</sup>:

- 1) **Communion with God:** Humanity is created for communion with God, to know him, to "walk with him in the cool of the day"<sup>6</sup>. We are called to live in the reality of that relationship, to enjoy it and to experience it. That relationship was lost to all humanity in the Fall and restored through Jesus.
- 2) **Community with each other:** Humanity is built for relationships, no companion was found for Adam amongst the animals, so God made "flesh after [his] flesh". Clear, open healthy relationships were lost at the Fall. The New Testament describes the restoration of *koinonia* amongst all peoples – Jew, Gentile, slave and free.
- 3) **Co-creativity:** God's work in Creation appears to come to some kind of conclusion on the seventh day<sup>7</sup>. His work is described as one of a skilled craftsman<sup>8</sup>. There is, however, still further 'work' required: "no plant of the field had yet sprung up ... for there was no man to work the ground"<sup>9</sup>. The implication is this: that creation only fulfils its full creative intent when mankind works in conjunction with God and to serve worship and honour God, by

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<sup>2</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 390

<sup>3</sup> John 3:16

<sup>4</sup> I will attempt to distinguish God's Incarnation in Jesus for general incarnational talk by capitalising it!

<sup>5</sup> Following Paul Stevens schema in *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work and Ministry in Biblical Perspective*, 2000

<sup>6</sup> Genesis 3:8

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 2:2-3 – "work" in the sense of God's work occurs 3 times

<sup>8</sup> The sense of the Hebrew word is: "craftsmanship, deeds/acts; emphasising skilled labour and its benefits". In contrast with painful toil, labour, heavy work. See VanGemeren *NIDOTTE*, 1997

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2:5

working his creation to enable it to fulfil it's potential<sup>10</sup>. Work took on its cursed nature as a result of the Fall, but its pre-Fall vision is also restored in Jesus.

Adam and Eve's mission was to fill the earth with a humanity like this. They were to fill the earth with the rule of God through his image – a rule that is not oppressive or domineering but a releasing of creativity and potential. The Fall resulted from humanities decision to forsake God and build instead their own kingdom, and to run things their own way, to become like gods. The 'true humanity' vision soon slipped into a false humanity, a corrupted humanity, a tainted image. It turned into a ruling kingdom that demonstrated division, domination, corruption and destruction of and within creation.

Hence God's representative people started with Adam and Eve, who decided to build their own kingdom instead of God's, then moved on to Noah and his family and then Abraham. With Abraham we find the promise of a start of a new people of God, again designed to be God's representatives on the earth. Eventually God gave them a gracious gift, the Law, to give guidance to all aspects of their communal and personal lives. The Law was not just to govern their communion with Himself, but also to redefine a model people, a people able to demonstrate the character of God to the surrounding peoples. The intent was that they were to bless the nations<sup>11</sup> and be a light for the world<sup>12</sup>.

Captured in Isaiah's Servant Songs<sup>13</sup> we see the dream and promise of the restoration of God people, now defined as a remnant, true Israel over against an unfaithful nation. Within the core of these prophetic visions lies the renewed promise of a people who would be a light to the nations, and who would be the sign of new creation for the whole of creation. The dream of God's fulfilling His redemption plan is restored: a new heavens and a new earth. In these songs true, faithful Israel is embodied in the "the Servant". The Servant is to bring justice, express concern for the weak, to bring freedom for captives and sight to the blind. And this justice and deliverance is to be brought to the whole earth<sup>14</sup>. Hence he also embodies God's deliverance for his creation. In the interplay of Israel and Servant we find further indications of God's original intentions for Israel: within their self-identity they understood that they were representing God's true reign on the earth, they were part of God's plan to restore his image on the earth, and that this image was to bring restoration and blessing for the whole of creation. However the means to this victorious reign bringing restoration and blessing was the submission to suffering and evil, the identification with the weak and the powerless.

Here in the Servant songs we find the Servant taking on two roles. Firstly he takes on the role of true, faithful Israel and secondly he takes the role of God's Deliver. It is not too long into the

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<sup>10</sup> The sense of the Hebrew word is: "work, perform, serve, worship, carry out, honour" (note: before the Fall!) See VanGemeren *NIDOTTE*, 1997

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 12:3

<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 42:6

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 40-55

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 49:6

Gospels and other New Testament writings that we see the reality of Jesus as The Servant<sup>15</sup>. Hence the ministry of Jesus fulfils this dual intention: the representation and embodiment (incarnation) of God's saving activity through the utter identification and care for those who are being delivered, even to the point of suffering their fate. And so to demonstrate to the world not only the reality of what God is like but also to reveal what Israel should truly have been like and more broadly what humanity should truly have been like.

This two-fold picture of embodying God and identifying completely with humanity is central to the incarnation. Therefore both of these aspects must be central to any kind of incarnational missiology. However more than that we see in the incarnation not only actions, but the model for a state of being: Jesus came modelling what the community of true Israel should have been, and therefore he came modelling what true humanity should be, as the first fruits of new creation<sup>16</sup>.

These thoughts are central to the Christian Way. Jesus called people to follow him, to become disciples. The early disciples, in line with their Jewish heritage, understood that Jesus was not founding a new religion, but a new way of living and of being God's people, God's representative missional image on the earth. In Grenz's words: "The locus of the divine image in the new Testament is the community of Christ who together comprise the foretaste of the new humanity in Christ"<sup>17</sup>. Their concern was not a worry about a personal post-mortem destination, but being part of God's climactic redemptive new-creation action.

All mission must hold this 'new creation dream' as its central tenant in order for it to be caught up in God's mission. *The ultimate goal of mission is peoples on the earth living out the reality of what it means to true humanity, living out the reality of communion with God, community with each other and entering into co-creativity with God.* This action will be brought to a wonderful completion on the Messiah's return, the New Creation work, started in the incarnation and continued by the work of the Spirit who has caught up the people of God in it, will bring about a final transformation of God's people and of the whole of the cosmos<sup>18</sup>.

With all that we hopefully have a correct context and are now in a position to explore a little more deeply the implications of the two central aspects of the incarnation: embodying God and complete identification. Firstly we need to briefly establish the reasons, if they are not yet obvious, as to why we are able and in fact should see the incarnation as a model for God's Communities.

### **An Incarnation Ecclesiology?**

As we have already discussed, the Incarnation was God's climactic act. This missionary God of Love's most excellent solution was to express that love by coming as a man. This is nothing less than surprising; it was surprising for 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, it was surprising for Jesus' disciples, it is surprising for us. This very action therefore reveals to us not only the reality of that love in terms

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<sup>15</sup> Not least Luke 4:18-19

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor 15:20

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.stanleyjgrenz.com/articles/talk\\_mag.html](http://www.stanleyjgrenz.com/articles/talk_mag.html)

<sup>18</sup> Romans 8

of its benefits for humanity, but also the nature of the love and of the Lover. Marshall McLuhan has famously said: “The medium is the message”<sup>19</sup>, implying that the means of communicating the message contains a message itself. If this is indeed the case, then our efforts to communicate God’s love to God’s world can take no higher form than that which God Himself employed.

Further, it is possible to surmise that Paul’s image of the church as Christ’s body can also be seen in a missional sense. Clearly the context is the discussion of internal church dynamics, however it is not beyond the scope of the image to see the church as *the body of Jesus in the world*, and in that sense an extension of the incarnation<sup>20</sup>. Webber goes further:

“... to say the church is the body of Christ is to affirm the church is the continuation of the presence of Jesus in the world; its life is sustained by the energy of the Spirit who is “the Lord and giver of life”; there is a divine side and a human side to the church; the church is a witness to the drama of salvation; and the church is the presence of the eschatological future in the world. In this sense the church does not “have” a mission, it is mission, by its very existence in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

Hence the church is the hands and feet of Jesus, the love of God expressed in Jesus and empowered by the Spirit, made real to the world through His body<sup>22</sup>. The real, ‘pinchable’ love of God, no longer limited to the scope of one man’s short lifetime, but multiplied through all ages and all peoples, as it becomes a reality in the church. This people embody this love through the Spirit of Jesus, which lived in Jesus and which Jesus sent forth to enable his mission to continue: “As the Father sent me so do I send you”<sup>23</sup>.

Finally, a small qualification: given the body imagery it is clear that an incarnational paradigm functions communally and not individually. In fact it is potentially dangerous to apply an incarnational missiology individually as it runs the risk of the missionary or the community being reached placing on him a Messiah-complex. All incarnational mission is pointing beyond itself to *the Incarnation in Jesus the Messiah*.

### **The Incarnation: Embodying God**

In evangelical circles, it is this aspect of the incarnation that has received most attention. The mystery of the incarnation is the amazing reality of God becoming man. Hence Jesus is able to say in John’s gospel “if you have seen me you have seen the Father”<sup>24</sup>. Jesus wants his disciples to understand that if they want to know what God is like then you need look no further than himself. As Peterson puts so beautifully in *The Message*: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighbourhood”<sup>25</sup>. Within this we find much of the heart of God’s incarnational mission.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 414

<sup>20</sup> Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 2002, 95

<sup>21</sup> *ibid* 113

<sup>22</sup> More detail on this concept can be found in this article: [www.organicchurch.net/archives/2004/09/15/incarnational-missiology](http://www.organicchurch.net/archives/2004/09/15/incarnational-missiology)

<sup>23</sup> John 20:21b

<sup>24</sup> John 14:9

<sup>25</sup> John 1:14 (*The Message*)

Firstly, it is clear that the mission involved *movement*. God's missionary action required the community of the Trinity to undergo some serious disruption<sup>26</sup>! God's movement in the Incarnation is the first step of His incarnational mission. God did not remain separate, 'waiting' for people to come and experience the possibilities of his deliverance, rather God was the initiator, God made the first move, God came to His world.

Similarly, then, it is the church's responsibility to *move*. This is no small statement. Recent history has seen the church work within a Christendom paradigm in creating an alternate 'Christian' world to the mainstream. Built within paradigm this is a 'come to us' posture. It assumes that church has a place in culture where people would choose to come if they wanted to find God. As we have discussed that is no longer the case in the majority of the Western World. They have many options should they wish to pursue spirituality, and a Christian church is often bottom of the list because of peoples history and/or media influence. There are numerous examples today of churches trying to address this reality by 'improving' the church meetings, creating "sanctified places into which unbelievers must come to encounter the Gospel"<sup>27</sup>. However this is predominantly working within the same paradigm: 'if you want to find God you should come to us'.

In order to take seriously God's incarnational mission we must 'go to them'. We, corporately, must move from our comfortable church routines and safe meetings to live out this gospel amongst the people God is reaching. In the words of Frost and Hirsch: "the missional church disassembles itself and seeps into the cracks and crevices of society in order to be Christ to those who don't yet know him"<sup>28</sup>. God's love is active, moving, searching those who are missing. We do a disservice to God when that love is demonstrated as static, as mediated from hierarchy and conditional on certain acts. God's love, incarnated in the community, comes from below, from the position of a slave to the world<sup>29</sup>, such that they might find God in Jesus.

To truly grasp this, we must move beyond any kind of sacred-secular divide. Whereas an attractional church may confuse the church gathering or building as in some way sacred, the incarnational church must have a view that God is already working in the world and that, since the Holy Spirit indwells the community, they also carry God in the world. This understanding means that the communities primary role is to follow the Spirit in identifying where God is already working and to participate with God in making that work come to fruition.

Secondly, it was God's *Word* that came in Jesus. It is clear that in embodying God, the community carries a message within it. The message is one of deliverance, healing, salvation, new creation and also of challenge. God's coming in Jesus carried with it an inherent challenge to a new way of life. Whilst we will go on to discuss the nature of an incarnational approach to culture, it always comes in the context that God's call is counter-cultural. It has been said that

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<sup>26</sup> For a paper like this tongue in cheek is the only option. There is not space or brain power to expand this sufficiently!! Theologically I think it is correct to say that the trinity was 'eternally changed' by the incarnation.

<sup>27</sup> Frost & Hirsch *The Shaping*, 2003, 12

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 12

<sup>29</sup> Philippians 2:7

Jesus ministry was 'subversive' and a 'critique from within' and this is no doubt true<sup>30</sup>. Jesus ministry involved great challenge to the dominant systems. Here was no personal salvation compartmentalised from 'public' life. Rather here was God's in-breaking kingdom, bringing peace and justice to all people.

Hence in embodying God, the missional church is called to be a counter-cultural community. Living out the realities of God's kingdom will be different from the surrounding culture. Often that counter-cultural challenge has been seen as the maintenance of biblical 'values', for example that of the nuclear family or personal morality. It is possible that this way of being counter-cultural is based on a Christendom paradigm that is trying to maintain a Christian society. It seems to me that the counter-cultural challenge of the missional church is far more challenging and radical than that. The model for the incarnational community is the life and death of Jesus, the one who looked to needs of others over his own and gave himself as a slave to the world. The devastating challenge of the counter-cultural community is therefore the self-giving love of God that calls us to give up our own interests for each other and for the sake of the world<sup>31</sup>. This challenge will be lived out in the community as it forgoes privileges and rights for each other. There is no question that Paul expects the church in Philippi, for example, to be *this kind of community* in his challenge to them to follow Jesus example<sup>32</sup>. The challenge will overflow from the community and challenge wider culture in such ways as consumerism, selfish living and abuses of the poor and marginalized. Wright identifies this incarnational challenge in Paul's argumentation in 1 Corinthians 8-10 and concludes:

"It [the crucifixion] means the remaking of the community of the people of God in a particular fashion, namely, as the community that is given such security in the love of the true god that it is able to forgo all human privileges and rights to which it might otherwise lay claim. What is more, Paul saw clearly that the cross, in achieving this, offers the most fundamental challenge to paganism at every level. ... Instead of merely pursuing a path of private spirituality *within* the world, the church is to pursue a path of mission *to* the world. And the victory which is to be won by that mission is the victory of the cross."<sup>33</sup>

The counter-cultural challenge is once again, then, not what we demand from the world but what we give to the world. The life of a community that lives like this will provoke response in a world that demands rights for themselves and protects the generation of wealth over and above ethical considerations. The counter-cultural community will appeal for the rights of others and will challenge the abuses of humanity and creation. In discussing Matthew's Gospel, a book used so much as a basis for the Great Commission, Bosch states:

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<sup>30</sup> See for example Wright *The Challenge of Jesus*, SPCK, 2000

<sup>31</sup> As Bosch says of Matthew's mission schema: "the incarnation continues in the disciples' self-giving service to the world", Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 81

<sup>32</sup> Philippians 2:5: "Have this mindset in your community, which is indeed a community in Christ". See Gorman *Cruciformity*, 2001, 43 for a full outline of this translation. "Paul intends the exhortation to the Philippians and the narrative of Christ's self-emptying and self-humbling to be understood as two versions of one self-renouncing, others-regarding pattern of slavery, with Christ as the paradigm and the Philippians as the "reincarnation"" Gorman *Cruciformity*, 2001, 258

<sup>33</sup> Wright N T *One God, One Lord, One People: Incarnational Christology for a Church in a Pagan Environment*  
<http://www.northpark.edu/sem/exaudit/papers/wright.html>

“It is unthinkable to divorce the Christian life of love and justice from being a disciple ... mission is not narrowed down to an activity of making individuals new creatures, of providing them with “blessed assurance” so that, come what may, they will be “eternally saved”. ... [but] ...making new believers sensitive to the needs of others, opening their eyes and hearts to recognise injustice, suffering, oppression and the plight of those fallen by the wayside.”<sup>34</sup>

Herein lies the failure of many modern attempts at contextualisation of the gospel. It is possible to have a ‘relevant’ message that speaks to the felt needs of a culture and places Jesus as the answer, but completely miss that in the Word becoming flesh the message is also innately counter-cultural.

In order to be counter-cultural, however, you must be within and connected to the culture. The subversive nature of the Incarnation was possible because of Jesus identity as a first century Jewish male, and 30 years pre-ministry preparation! The ‘offence of the gospel’ to a culture cannot be judged readily by the ‘outsider’, otherwise the risk is purely the imposition of another culture.

Finally, embodying God as a church community means that the nature of the communal life reflects something of the nature of God. This clearly is one of the scariest things about church life – that the church is in some way sacramental in that it mediates God to people. The God that people encounter in the church community is the God that they do or don’t believe in. Incarnational thinking understands that this is not limited to what is said but to every aspect of the gatherings, not least the nature of the gatherings and the way the church engages with them individually. Praise God for many different expressions of church that express “the manifold wisdom of God ... to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms”<sup>35</sup>.

### **The Incarnation: Complete Identification**

Philippians 2:5-11, the most basic incarnational text, describes Jesus denial of the rights of deity (v6), his self-emptying (v7) and his taking on of the nature of a human slave (v7-8). As we approach our second main section this process becomes crucial for our understanding. An incarnational mission finds itself on these unassuming, sacrificial basics. It hardly needs to be stated how astounding this reality is; of all the options God could have chosen to reach out to His world he chose denial of rights, self-emptying and assumption of a humble position. It also hardly needs to be stated quite how different that is to many of our contemporary approaches to mission. Let’s look at these in a little more depth.

#### *Denial of rights*

Jesus refused to exploit his divine attributes. He did not claim position or authority<sup>36</sup> in his interactions with others. In Christendom the church had and claimed positions of power and influence, sometime rightly and sometimes wrongly. However, this still influences us in our now

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<sup>34</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 81. He also with regards Matthew’s Gospel: “it is unjustifiable to regard the great commission as about evangelism and the great commandment as referring to social involvement”.

<sup>35</sup> Ephesians 3:10

<sup>36</sup> Although clearly this was evident to others through his ministry!

post-Christendom world in our desire to bolster positions of *power* through the size and centralisation. We often claim certain *rights* to perform certain activities or say certain things, whilst at the same time we wish to deny other religions those same rights. In a pluralist society this conflict cannot work. What influence then is an incarnational community able to assume? It seems to me that healthy incarnational influence is based on the ability of the community [through the Spirit] to transform society through real and tangible ways. Respect and a voice is gained most successfully, not by the assumption of a position or right, but by the demonstration that God's is able to affect the world not least through his community. Webber quotes the postmodern philosopher Foucault as saying "before Descartes<sup>37</sup>, one could not be immoral and know the truth"<sup>38</sup> and hence he can say "Truth ... is not defended by reason but by the individual and the community that embodies it and lives it out"<sup>39</sup>. The 'power' and 'influence' of truth finds its expression as the world encounter its transforming impact in their lives.

### *Self-emptying*

The emptying of self is what caused Jesus to be able to come as a man. It means to give up those things that would cause us to feel superior to people in our interaction with them. Self-emptying is the required step before being able to truly identify with others, it is what is required in order to perform the 'taking on' of the next step. When we think of cross-cultural mission, this self-emptying involves the putting off of ones own culture. Culture is like the water that a fish swims in, you don't know it is there until you leave it, hence one cannot just forget it. The call here then is for self-awareness of the fact that all of our knowing is somehow culturally conditioned. Self-emptying requires that we accept this fact even if we don't know yet which aspects are obscured to another culture by it. There is no question that this is hard, particularly when the cross-cultural mission is taking place on our doorstep rather than in a jungle! However, this is an open-handed, humble approach to mission that accepts that we are in someway still carriers of the disease that we seek to cure. On this basis, incarnational mission is more about being a learner than being a teacher<sup>40</sup>. The action of the missional community seeks to hear and learn from the people it is reaching, it seeks to catch the sound of God's prior activity in their lives. Anything other than this can only "result in a superficial adaptation of the gospel 'from above. Inculturation is essentially a community process 'from below'"<sup>41</sup>. This old Chinese poem captures it well:

"Go to the people  
Live among them  
Learn from them  
Love them  
Start with what they know  
Build on what they have"<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Who classically philosophised "I think therefore I am" on which much of rationalist philosophy leans.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 2002, 96

<sup>39</sup> Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 2002, 102

<sup>40</sup> Hence Len Barlotti can talk of the cross-cultural missionary as being 110% of a person!!

<sup>41</sup> Cray *Mission-Shaped Church*, 2004, 91

<sup>42</sup> Hunter *Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 2000, 120

### *Taking on ...*

In the Incarnation, God did not just become human; God became a first century Jewish male. He was born as one, he spent 30 years growing up as one, and amazingly we know very little about it. The reason for this is, I propose, that it was all fairly normal and there wasn't much to say! God's self-denial and self-emptying action in the Incarnation involved the adoption of the culture being reached out to. Jesus identified fully with his people, he loved them and he cared for them. This was not God 'dressing up', rather it was God coming to terms with their real existence, experiencing their pains and their joys. God came living their life and speaking their language: "the universal Word speaks only with a local dialect"<sup>43</sup>. Incarnational mission therefore seeks to see the gospel and the church speaking to a community in their cultural language, reflecting their experiences.

"If it is the nature of God's love to undertake such sacrifice, it must also be the nature of his church. The Church is most true to itself when it gives itself up, in the current form, to be reformed among those who do not know God's Son. In each new context the Church must die to live."<sup>44</sup>

I believe that it is first the Gospel that must take the form of the recipient culture. Frost and Hirsch indicate "incarnational mission is the means by which the gospel can become a genuine part of a people group without damaging the innate cultural frameworks that provide that people group with a sense of meaning and history"<sup>45</sup>. The implication here is that the Gospel is a message of good news for the whole world, not one of conquest and cultural imperialism, but one of redemption and transformation. The challenge of an incarnational mission is to engage in conversation with culture to learn and to embrace the culture, to plant the seed of the gospel in the 'soil' of that culture, and to nurture its growth. "The focus then is 'new creation', on the transformation of the old, on the plant which, having flowered from its seed, is at the same time something fundamentally new when compared with that seed"<sup>46</sup>. The missionary message should change when it hits the ground of a new culture as it allows for the fact that the message is currently limited by the carrier. This missional activity therefore shaped is Christologically, around Christ, rather than theologically, around our own cultural formations *about* God.

Equally importantly the incarnational community must seek to embody the gospel in an appropriate way to the culture which it reaching. The form of church cannot be predefined or idealised in the mission process, rather the shape and form of the communal life must grow and work with the receivers of the message. As stated above, it is not possible to separate the content of the message from the way it is communicated. The gospel is not a new theory; it is a message that must be lived out anew in each culture. This is very much opposed to a separatist view of church. The call here is for an engaged church, a church living out life in the context of the world, a community sharing in the joys, pains and troubles of those around and living a transformed gospel reality in the midst. Bonhoeffer has said "The church is only the church when it exists for

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<sup>43</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 453

<sup>44</sup> Cray *Mission-Shaped Church*, 2004, 88

<sup>45</sup> Frost & Hirsch *The Shaping*, 2003, 37

<sup>46</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 455

others ... the church must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving"<sup>47</sup>. The result is not so much a church 'for others' as a church 'with others'.

The alternative to an incarnational mission is a gospel that is pre-packaged, artificial and inauthentic, one that does not reflect the complex nature of people everyday experience. The incarnational community, like Jesus, eats and plays with the people being reached, seeking to interact in a real way with them. This then allows the rhythms and lifestyle patterns of the people being reached to determine the shape of the communal life and corporate gatherings. As the gospel gets planted and a church gets birthed amongst a new people we find the possibility of multiplication growth rather than addition growth. In the latter, persons are picked off one at a time out of their contexts to a foreign community<sup>48</sup>; in the former the gospel creates disciples within their contexts giving real possibility of the gospel impacting the whole people group.

### **The Incarnation: Summary**

Newbigin has classically given the church three roles as a response to the Gospel message<sup>49</sup>: it is to "become corporately a sign, instrument and foretaste" of the Kingdom of God. These three aspects powerfully challenge the purpose of the churches existence casting it as a community that (1) points beyond itself to God and his kingdom that will one day be consummated, (2) is used by that kingdom to extend its purposes, and (3) lives the reality of that kingdom life, that will be future reality, here in the present so that people can 'touch' and 'taste' it here and now. These aspects sum up succinctly the breadth of what it means to be an incarnational community.

Therefore, as an incarnation community we are to 'move into our neighbourhoods'<sup>50</sup>. Giving up our own self-interests and positions of power and even our rights, we are to empty ourselves of 'answers', to take the humble posture of a learner and to enter into conversation with our neighbour. We are to take on the form of our neighbour, to speak his language and to seek to understand his thoughts, values and symbols. We are to take the posture of a servant to him, to experience his life of joy and pain, and so to allow the gospel to speak to him where he is at and to allow him to experience the gospel in the shared life of the faith community. We are to live out our lives in such a way as to point beyond ourselves to the greater reality of God, and to offer him life in God and hope of deliverance, to call him too to offer his loyalties to the one true God in the context of the community<sup>51</sup>. By drawing people into the life of the community by their encounter

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<sup>47</sup> quoted in Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 375

<sup>48</sup> This has been referred to as vacuum cleaner church, by Alan Roxburgh: "This is not the same as current attempts to grow bigger and bigger churches that act like vacuum cleaners, sucking people out of their neighbourhoods into a sort of Christian supermarket."

<sup>49</sup> "The church is the bearer to all nations of a gospel that announces the kingdom, the reign and the sovereignty of God. It calls men and women to repent of their false loyalty to other powers, to become believers in the one true sovereignty, and so to become corporately a sign, instrument and foretaste of that sovereignty of the one true living God over all nature, all nations and all human lives" Newbigin *Foolishness to the Greeks*, 1986

<sup>50</sup> cf John 1:14 *The Message*

<sup>51</sup> In Webbers words: "In sum the community embodies the Christian narrative, the unchurched "step into" the narrative, the narrative grasps them even as they grasp it, and eventually the individual embodies the reality of the church's story as he chooses to live his life from the standpoint of the community of faith." Webber, *Younger Evangelicals*, 2002, 104

with the cultural, yet counter-cultural, acts of that community allows them to not respond to a self-help or a self-protective gospel, but ensures that they understand that they are responding to a call to a new way of life.

This is a mission of love expressing a God of love embodied in a community of believers. This cannot be just words or ideas but a dynamic movement of the community into the lives of those around with real acts of love that connect with peoples lives in a personal way. This is God's great plan! Notice that this is not the work of an evangelist nor the work of the 'Pastor' but the work of a community living out a life of love<sup>52</sup>, "for it is the community that is the primary bearer of mission"<sup>53</sup>. As McLaren so eloquently says:

"If the Great Commission is about the making of disciples (and it surely is), and if evangelism is the proclaiming of the good news of the kingdom of God (the message which calls people into discipleship to Jesus), then if people aren't being deployed into the world in reconciling and healing neighbor-love, evangelism isn't happening nor is the Great Commission happening, in spite of our great commotion."<sup>54</sup>

Hopefully you can see here that the church cannot be 'doing' mission, rather the life of the church *is* mission. The church does not have a mission, God's mission has a church. The church is part of the movement of God towards the world, the church are those who are caught up with this sending love. God is recruiting a family to join him in loving the world. Hence mission is, if you like self-sustaining, in reaching to the world in love, those who respond do so to a join the mission of love (see fig 2).

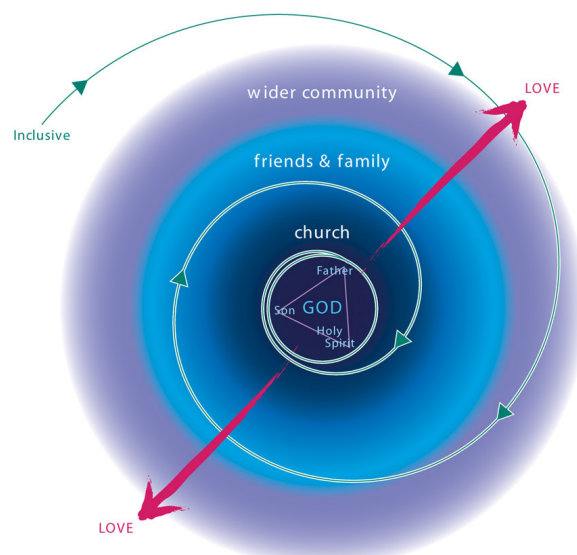


Figure 2 – An Incarnational Trinitarian Model

<sup>52</sup> Ephesians 5:1

<sup>53</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1991, 472

<sup>54</sup> Brian McLaren *The Strategy We Pursue*, <http://www.allelon.org/articles/>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to outline an alternate view of mission. This alternate view is rooted in the character and action of God and in the changing context of the Western world. I believe that God's church must give up doing mission and learn to take on mission as a mode of being, part of its identity. The reason for this is that God is a missionary God and he is looking for a people to bear his image on the earth. The church finds itself caught up with God's loving action towards the world. God's plan for new creation and a people once again being his image on the earth is expressed in Isaiah, and particularly in The Servant in Isaiah 40-55. This Servant finds himself embodying both God's deliverance for Israel, and hence the world, and also identifying completely with humanity so as to suffer their same fate and take their punishment on himself. The Incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth fulfils these Isaianic expectations. And within that we find some clues as to the nature of this incarnational mission.

- 1) With the transitions taking place in Western culture it is no longer satisfactory for church to exist happily separate on the edges of society, a distant light on the horizon. We are required to go to the people and no longer expect them to come to us, fulfilling our requirements.
- 2) The church should expect to take on a different posture within society, and embrace the opportunities that it brings.
- 3) The ultimate goal of mission is peoples on the earth living out the reality of what it means to be true humanity, living out the reality of communion with God, community with each other and entering into co-creativity with God.
- 4) As the people of God begin to live out this missional vision, it must drive us to love our neighbour and to be a transformational influence in society.
- 5) The body of Christ is the continuation of the incarnation on the earth, hence incarnational mission is a communal lifestyle.
- 6) As an incarnational community we embody God for the world. This means that we must adopt a 'go to them' posture instead of the 'come to us' posture of Christendom. It means giving up an inherent dualism and instead see as sacred our interactions with people outside the church community.
- 7) The message we carry is inherently counter-cultural. This counter-cultural nature is most clearly expressed in its self-giving love for others both inside and outside the church community. This foregoing of rights strikes a challenge right to the heart of every culture.
- 8) The nature of the community life expresses something of the nature of God to outsiders. "The medium is the message".
- 9) As an incarnational community we are called to complete identification with those to whom we are reaching. This includes their pain and their sufferings, as well as their

pleasures and their joys. Following the footsteps of the Isaianic Servant we can be part of absorbing their pain, even as Jesus did on the cross.

- 10) This complete identification involves a denial of rights. Influence is not to be gained through power positions, but rather through the respect given by others as a result of the reality of the incarnational communities actions in their lives.
- 11) Complete identification involves a self-emptying. The posture of the missional community is one of a learning community that enters into genuine relationships and conversations with the community being reached. The missional community takes a humble posture even with the gospel aware of its own cultural limitations on it.
- 12) The incarnational community takes on the culture of those it is trying to reach. It is aware that the gospel can speak to all peoples and all cultures, and that it also speaks in each of those as a native.
- 13) Not only does the community take on the culture of the community it takes on the posture of a slave to them, seeking to serve them with the transforming love of God.
- 14) In doing this the community is entering into their life: their routines, their activities, their eating, their play, their symbols, their values, their communication methods, enjoying friendship and conversation!

It is my conviction that this view of mission can transform our church communities. Many churches feel disabled by a lack of resources and people, unable to replicate the model of the 'successful' church. An incarnational paradigm turns this around, empowering every church, from "2 or 3 gathered" up, to live out this gospel authentically in the context of their neighbourhoods and social networks. It begins to suggest that maybe small churches are better equipped for this dynamic movement of love seeping into the society, than large churches. It transforms the burden of 'success' from *the return*; in terms of money, converts and Sunday morning attendees, to *the deliverables*; in terms of the community entering a life long journey of learning to live out a life of love for the sake of the world, empowered by the Spirit. It releases every community to build lifestyle connections with the small communities around and make a real difference, as we demonstrate to a hurting world what it means to live as true humanity.

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## **Internet Resources**

- Allelon: <http://www.allelon.org> [great collection of articles from a group of thinkers and practitioners]
- EMIS: <http://bgc.gospelcom.net/emis> [Some interesting articles from a missionary organisation]
- Grenz S: <http://www.stanleygrenz.com> [great articles from a Trinitarian, post-foundationalist evangelical scholar]
- Mclaren B: <http://www.anewkindofchristian.com> [collection of articles and links]
- Wright N T: <http://www.ntwrightpage.com> [links to lots of articles]