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**Gospel Incarnation and praxis: an Albanian Evangelical approach**

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In this short paper, I will present some ideas about incarnationaltheology as discussed by Alen Hirsche and Tim Keller, Eckhard J. Schnabel. They give a framework to speak about Gospel Incarnation and praxis in the Albanian context. I am aware that this might be simply a summary or introduction to Hirsche or Keller’s views on incarnation.

Initially, I would like to concur with Alan Hirsch who claims that the incarnational means more than *contextualization* and more than *enculturation*. Hirsch says, “*If missional means going out (being sent into the world), then incarnational means going deep down into the culture*.” There is a difference in this view between mission and incarnation. If mission means going somewhere or sending someone, a team, two by two… getting there in the community, then incarnational should mean to become a genuine part of community life and all that it entails. This may involve embedding oneself in the community culture, tradition. Moreover, in doing so, become part of its history, existence and evolution.

Hirsch elaborates:

*[The fact that Jesus] was in the neighborhood for 30 years and no one noticed says a lot about God and how he engages the human situation. The incarnation thus shows us that God speaks from within a particular culture, in ways that people can grasp, understand, and respond. The incarnation gives us the primary biblical model of engagement—this is how God does it and we who follow his way should take a similar path.[[1]](#footnote-2)*

Next, some may think of *incarnational* in terms of being *missional.* Others tend to think of incarnation *as a pattern forministry*. Some others of ‘high church’ circles identify incarnation with “*sacramental ministry”* that they have been practicing*.* Tim Keller explains that in the past he has used the term to mean that our “*deeds and lives should embody what we believe” or “a synonym for expressing the Christian life to a new situation.”*What does this mean? To define this in my context, it would mean that an Albanian person, as a part of that particular community should be able to present and manifest to their people the wisdom and the beauty of the Good News of Jesus Christ. They should also be able to seek ways to incarnate the gospel in his community life and culture. Think of Albanian singer, in a different setting of the same culture who tries to live out what he/she believes and struggles to find the expression of his/her faith.

Also, Eckhard J. Schnabel, writing [*Early Christian Mission, Volume 2: Paul and the Early Church*](http://www.wtsbooks.com/product-exec/product_id/7035/nm/Early%2BChristian%2BMission%2B%282%2BVolume%2BSet%29%2B%5BHardcover%5D/?utm_source=gospelcoalition&utm_medium=blogpartners)*,* explains that

For [the Gospel of ] John, it is not the manner of Jesus’ coming into the world, the Word becoming flesh, the incarnation, that is a “model” for believers; rather, it is the nature of Jesus’ relationship to the Father who sent him into the world, which is one of obedience to and dependence upon the Father.

In my opinion, *incarnation* is the very substance of the union of Father and Son, on that nature of relationship between Father and Jesus. The doctrine of Jesus’ incarnation seems that is not so much about his mission on earth. It may lead to misconstruction if the incarnation does not have it’s centre and focus on Jesus’ two natures; *Son of God and Son of man*, God and human at same time. I do agree with those who claim “that the doctrine of the incarnation is not necessarily related to the nature of the Son’s mission. Rather, it centers on the nature of the union of the divine Son with our humanity. The theological term is the *hypostatic union*.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Incarnation: like salt and light.**

Thinking about incarnationalso leads my thoughts to what Jesus shared in Sermon on the Mount: “As light and salt in the world, in the community.” Light is so important in the community that is impossible to survive without it. The same is true of salt, which is needed for our physical body to live or survive. Light is necessary for making things visible, functioning and enlightening, therefore light is needed for the very life and existence of creation.

In Math: 5:13,14. Jesus said:

“You are the salt of the earth. 14“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden.15Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.16In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

**Incarnational Dischipleship:** elaborated by ethicist Glen Stassen based on the Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s unfinished theological work and ethics. Bonhoeffer wrote *Nachloge*, Discipleship and had his significant work on Sermon on the Mount as it is recorded in the Gospels.

Incarnational Dischipleship involves three themes: First, God revealed incarnationally, embodied historically, realistically in Jesus of Nazareth, thickly interpreted. Second, Holistic sovereignty of God and the Lordship of Christ through all of life. And third theme is; The Holy Spirit independent from all the powers and his call for repentance from all the loyalties and ideologies which are unfaithful to the lordship of Christ.[[3]](#footnote-4)

The centrality of the incarnation in his (Bonhoeffer’s) theological ethics guided him: As God entered history incarnationally in Jesus, and as Jesus entered compassionately into the midst of the lives of outcasts, so we are called to enter incarnationally into the lives of others. Bonhoeffer often uses the German word eintreten, “to enter in,” to write of this compassionate entering into the concerns and experiences of others.[[4]](#footnote-5)

**Through reading the Gospels we see that Jesus’ incarnation happened through an act of the Holy Spirit.** In the Gospel of Mathew says:

34“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”35The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Mary was impregnated by the work of the Holy Spirit and so Jesus was born and became flesh, a human. It is the task of the Holy Spirit as the gospels record that Christ’s incarnation happened in the human history. I believe that there cannot be any kind of incarnation without the power and the function of the Holy Spirit. It is God, the Holy Spirit who makes the incarnation happen, real, physical, and something that could be seen and touched. It seems to me that the Holy Spirit is the one who made *the Son of God* to become also *the Son of man*, a human being. The Son of God became the son of Mary, a real Jew and the son of Eve, to represent all the humanity before God and to be able to die for them. So, Jesus needed the help, the power, the act of the Holy Spirit upon Mary to become flesh, to become human and to become Son of man.

**Therefore, the Gospel can be incarnated and relate to the culture through the guidance and fellowship of the Spirit**. In hard places like Albania and the Balkans, where there have been situations of war and confrontation, there is need to teach about the Gospel incarnated in our society. We need to teach about the Father, about Jesus-incarnated. However teaching about the leading of the Holy Spirit when applying Scriptures and having a lifestyle that embodies what one believes. It is about incorporating the teaching of the Scriptures, and the Gospels in particular together with the power of God, “in fellowship of the Spirit.”What is at stake is the power of the resurrected Lord when applying and incarnating the Good news of Jesus of Nazareth in one’s life and one’s culture.

**Who is the hero?!**

 When I was preparing to share a message I was talking with an elder of a church. He literally said: Fredi, when we think of you, we think of a hero! I was caught by surprise as I of course don’t think about myself in that way. I quickly responded to him in the front of the congregation. “If you think of Jesus when you think of me that makes me very happy!”That is what incarnational means for me. With our life, physical body and our lifestyle, we try to point to Jesus Christ. We are followers of Christ, a kind of “mini Jesus’, resembling our Saviour and Lord. Like those first followers were called **“*christianoi”.*** Acts 11:26

22News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.23When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts.24He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.25Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul,26and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called *Christians* first at Antioch.

**V. Incarnation in my circumstances.**

My father was a hard line communist and idealist. He was a good man and a good dad. His leadership position during the communist time meant he cared and served others too. When I was in Germany in 1992 I had a radical conversion to Christianity. My family had hard time accepting me and did not understand what happened. I took time to explain to him and to tell him about my faith. There were times I wanted to talk to him about God but he would stop me. There was nothing I could do but pray that in God’s timing I would be able to talk to him again about God. Many times, I would go and work with him in the farm and enjoyed being together. One day he suddenly asked me: Ok Fredi, tell me more about Jesus, God and Bible and so on. It took over 24 years to win him for Jesus Christ. It looked impossible but God knows how to open the hearts of people and the time to bring them to Him. Always, I reminded myself: Honor thy father and mother…time after time….

On May 16th 2015 my dad died. In those last moments with these words at the death bed: Jesus help me, Jesus help me…” my father passed away. We evangelicals take literally those words written by ap. Paul at Rom 10:13.for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”As my dad was in the coffin his face was literally shining, Why was that? It was strange for my family to see that picture. He was shining with the glory of his coming Lord. I miss my dad, and there is no one that can take his place in my life. However, I am comforted that he and others we have taught were shown the way of the Jesus.

**I want to discuss how the first Albanian Evangelicals at the end of XIX century and the beginning of XX century served and what it meant for them to be Gospel incarnation at that time of history.**

The **Albanian Evangelicals** had a very modest beginning at the end of XIX century in the city of Korca, South East Albania, but a very significant one. Their aim was to teach Albanians and others the Scriptures into Albanian language. Albania was part of Ottoman Empire and it was illegal to teach Albanian language in schools. Albanian Evangelicals translated Scriptures into Albanian language. This contributed greatly to the future of our people. Also, they translated many other literatures into Albanian language. Albanian Evangelicals loved their country and because of that they taught and developed the writing of the Albanian language. This cause was very high on their agenda. To some degree I compare their work on Albanian language with what Martin Luther did for the Germans by translating Latin New Testament into German and establishing “Hoch Deutsch” as standard language for his countrymen. Albanian Evangelicals envisioned teaching God’s Word in Albanian as a way of incarnating the Gospels in our culture and society. They helped in developing the Albanian language and literature in order to teach and educate Albanians with Scriptures and more. Lastly, Albanian Evangelicals took to their hears the Albanian question about an Albanian identity, culture and state .

**What about today?**

 The communist leadership during communism (1944-1990) closed down all the churches and almost wiped out the Christian presence in Albania. Albanian Evangelicals picked up their work and mission in Albania in 1991. The work of Evangelicals is spreading in Albania, mostly in the cities and towns of Albania. Albanian Evangelicals are known for their passion for evangelism and soul winning. Also, many of our churches and congregations are working by serving the marginalized groups and involved in other social ministries also.

In 1998-9 the evangelical community sacrificially served and cared for the Kosovar refugees coming to Albania. In my opinion, for the first time the Albanian society was able to see with their own eyes and to identify the Albanian Evangelicals whilst they were serving the Kosovar refugees. At that time The Albanian society recognized the role, the care and the power of those small Evangelical congregations. The president of Albania praised the service of Albanian Evangelicals to the refugees. The Evangelicals smoothed the process for the refugees at this time. Many other groups also served at this time, including the Albanian Orthodox Church and Catholics.

**Finally, the message of** the Gospel incarnated and its praxis goes contrary to worshiping the Bible. Why do I say this? Some Albanian Evangelicals may not be aware that they run the risk of worshiping the Bible, or making the Bible as the end in itself. Of course, the Albanian Evangelicals take seriously the Bible as the inspired Word of God.

 Worshipping the Scriptures is putting the book in place of a living relationship with God and gospel cannot be incarnated without relationship. Worship of scripture leads to fundamentalism, legalism and religiosity. This generates a “pseudo-Christianity” and a corrupted and a degenerated tradition, denying the living Lord and refusing his source of life, a living relationship.

How does a tradition engage in self-correction, or continuous repentance? Awareness that traditions are shaped by theological, social, and historical interactions tells us we need humility and a commitment to change. Any tradition needs a process of continuous repentance— learning and self-correction.” A degenerate tradition that can’t adjust but stays rigid and authoritarian— or a reactionary tradition that won’t adjust but becomes defensively fundamentalist— refuses Jesus’ call to continuous repentance.[[6]](#footnote-7)

The Scriptures teach us about Jesus.[[7]](#footnote-8) Jesus says: Scriptures teach about me! In the Scriptures we meet Jesus and worship Him! "Only a realistic Jesus who is solidly rooted in history can offer realistic guidance for the public ethics we need in a pluralistic world, without losing our Christian identity in secularism.” [[8]](#footnote-9)To Him be the Glory!

1. For more find Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*, (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press,2007) and Alan Hirsch, Debra Hirsch, *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. For more see online http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-incarnation-is-about-a-person-not-a-mission [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. For more information about Incarnational Dischipleship find in Stassen, Glen H. (2012-11-14). A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age (Kindle Locations 451-452). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Stassen, Glen H. (2012-11-14). A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age (Kindle Locations 743-746). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Bible NIV, Luke 1:34, 35 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Stassen, Glen H. (2012-11-14). A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age (Kindle Locations 239-240). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Luke 24:27 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Stassen, Glen H. (2012-11-14). A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age (Kindle Locations 1178-1179). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)