**The Gospel as Incarnation**

**The theological basis from an Orthodox perspective**

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Often presentations of issues from a particular theological tradition at ecumenical gatherings become polemical apologies for that tradition. As Archbishop Anastasios noted some years ago, “At ecumenical meetings many Orthodox theologians often tend to gloss over problematic issues in silence, and to idealize conditions within the Orthodox Church. In a pan Orthodox theological conference like this, however, we must soberly acknowledge the reality and proceed to self-criticism” (*Mission in Christ’s Way* pg. 77). Though this gathering is ecumenical I believe that our purpose is practical and that we must therefore forgo partisan polemics in order to grapple seriously with the challenges which we all face in order that we may all work more effectively for the mission of God.

The gospel and the incarnation are synonymous. There is no Good News without the incarnation and the incarnation is by definition Good News. The gospel is not the revelation of a philosophical truth about God, but God himself choosing to participate in our humanity. It is a physical reality in time and space.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:1, 14a ESV)

The fact that God himself became part of our physical reality means that when we respond to the gospel our physical way of being in the world will be transformed. The incarnation is treated with great eloquence and depth by St. Athanasius in his little book called not surprisingly, “*On the Incarnation.*” The message of this book is concisely summarized with the well-known and often quoted statement, “God became man that man might become God”. (Paragraph 54)

At the end of paragraph 7 St. Athanasius concisely outlines three things which Christ did through his incarnation. “He alone being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be an ambassador for all with the Father.” There is a fourth element not mentioned here in paragraph 7, but spoken of at length in paragraphs 14-16 which is to “teach the world about the Father”.

It is my perception that the different perspectives of Evangelicals and Orthodox regarding the incarnation can be seen as a tendency to emphasize some of these four points more than others. This is most visible with regard to the first two points. Orthodox are much more likely to emphasize Christ’s role in recreating all things. I will speak more about this below. Evangelicals are more likely to emphasize Christ’s work of “suffering on behalf of all”.

I think that Orthodox may also emphasize more Christ’s role as an ambassador for us before the Father. I think that there would be a stronger sense of Christ interceding (Hebrews 7:25) for us in the Orthodox Church and we definitely emphasize a great deal the work of all the saints who intercede before Christ on our behalf. I think that in general Evangelicals are uncomfortable with the idea of intercession. They will pray to Christ as God himself and they will pray to the Father, but the idea that we may need an intercessor is less emphasized.

Evangelicals may have a stronger sense of Christ’s mission to teach the world about the Father. I do not think that this is necessarily true in the long view of history or in theology, but in contemporary practice it seems that Evangelicals invest more in this. Orthodox would emphasize Christ’s role as teacher within the church community, but often do not have as strong a sense that Christ and His church must also teach the world that is not yet part of the church. I am interested to see what our discussions will manifest about this.

I believe that our understanding of the incarnation is enhanced if we keep all four of these aspects of Christ’s work in mind as we consider it. Each of these has multifaceted implications for our lives as Christians. I would like to reflect on the interconnection between the incarnation and Christian mission in three related areas: Sacrament, church, person.

1. Because of the incarnation all matter has the potential to be sacramental. The body of Jesus of Nazareth was the body of God. This is a scandal to the human mind. It is a scandal of particularity. How can a particular human body be at the same time the body of God? Nevertheless, this is the message of the incarnation that a particular human body of Jewish genetic makeup in first century Palestine was the body of God. It is, perhaps, the implications of this aspect of the incarnation that are most foreign to Evangelical thinking.

It is because of the incarnation of Christ, the union of divine and human in Him, that all life becomes sacramental. This is most visible in the Eucharist where we partake of the body and blood of Christ, because it is not merely the body of a human person, but the body and blood of God. Through our participation in His body and blood, we participate in the life of God. Sacraments are not isolated religious acts, which use matter as a conduit for “spiritual” transformation. Instead the sacramental approach to life sees the entire world, the entire physical creation, as God’s gift to us and the venue of our relationship with him.

The tragedy of the fall is the objectifying of creation. Man becomes God for himself and the creation is an object for his use and even abuse. When Christ re-creates all things through His incarnation, He makes it possible for the creation again to be the venue and means of our relationship with God, and therefore our salvation. In his book *For the Life of the World* Alexander Schmemann clearly expresses this way of being.

2. The church is the body of Christ. This is a continuation of the process of incarnation. Just as Christ was personally incarnate in a very particular way in first century Palestine, so His church as His body if it is to be faithful to Him, must be truly incarnate within each geographical, cultural and temporal situation in which it exists.

This is eloquently expressed by Archbishop Anastasios as follows: “Christian mission does not seek to “conquer” the world; neither does it aim to spread and project a Christian common­wealth that controls everything. Its purpose is not to increase the authority of an organized church, but to serve the world with love and humility, to offer it salvation. It is not simply a matter of transmitting religious teachings, but the *“incarnation” of the Word* in new geographical areas and new circumstances with a view to the establishment of new “churches,” of new nuclei of truth and grace, where the sacraments of the Kingdom will be celebrated and where its coming will be experienced in thanksgiving and praise.” (*Mission in Christ’s Way* pg. 128)

Historically, Orthodox Christianity has both conspicuously succeeded and catastrophically failed in this process of incarnation. To non-Orthodox, one of the most visible features of orthodoxy is its ethnic connections. In countries that are not historically Orthodox, Orthodox minorities identify themselves and are identified by others according to their ethnic affiliation. We have Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, Antiochian Orthodox, Romanian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, Bulgarian Orthodox and many more. It is largely in vain that we Orthodox emphasize to our non-Orthodox friends that there is indeed only one Orthodox Church and that all these different orthodoxies are simply historical cultural manifestations of Orthodoxy that grew up in a particular geographical location. Although there is clearly a common thread amongst all of these Orthodox traditions, there also appears to be a great deal of diversity between them.

In fact, the existence of all of these diverse Orthodox traditions witnesses eloquently to the ability of the gospel to be incarnate and to manifest itself through a great variety of cultures. In each of these Orthodox traditions there is the common DNA of the one faith, but manifested in a variety of languages, music, artistic forms, customs, festivals, foods, etc. To the members of each of these Orthodox communities there manifestation of the incarnation of orthodoxy in their culture can appear as the only possible manifestation.

Today, the historical success of the cultural incarnation of Orthodoxy also marks out the limit of its achievement and therefore, the point at which its failure begins. Because of the success of incarnation in previous centuries, it has appeared to many that the need for incarnation no longer exists, because we have achieved perfect Orthodox Christian cultures. The principle that created these cultures is the dynamic principle of the incarnation of the gospel into contemporary particularity. The gospel was beautifully incarnate into Greek, Serbian or Russian culture of centuries past. The tragedy is that the particularities produced by the principle have now become absolutes. Too often, traditionally Orthodox lands now perpetuate the particularity as an absolute in defiance of the principle which created it.

Let me illustrate. In the ninth century, the famous missionaries Cyril and Methodius created an alphabet for the Slavic languages and translated the Scripture and liturgy into these languages. This process was based on the principle that worship must be done in the language of the people. It was done in opposition to the trilingual doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church, which insisted that God could only be worshiped in the languages of Greek, Latin and Hebrew found on the cross. The principle produced an alphabet and the translation into a contemporary language. Today, that particularity is perpetuated in flagrant violation of the principle. When I was a student in seminary I remember clearly sitting in a classroom one day and hearing the heresy of trilingualism violently attacked. At the end of class I walked up the hill to the Chapel and stood through the Vespers in a language of which I and the vast majority of my classmates understood almost nothing, because it was an ancient language no longer spoken by anyone. It was however, one of the three languages found on the cross and therefore would have been accepted by the trilingualists.

The principle of incarnation which produced this beautiful liturgy was forgotten and only the particularity of the magnificent ancient liturgy was maintained. In my opinion this same schizophrenia occurs in many other areas. A historical particularity is maintained at the expense of the theological principle which created it.

At the same time, it must be affirmed that a great deal of wisdom and holiness is to be found in the historical Orthodox incarnation. Centuries of prayer and living with God, has produced a way of life which is deeply transformed by Christ. It is not wise, to lightly or flippantly dispense with the old in order to make room for the new. The application of the ancient principles of incarnation must be done with great care so that the treasure won through centuries of experience is not lost.

3. The Christian missionary, the bearer of the Good News, is a human person that has been incorporated into Christ and therefore, he is Christ incarnate. Just as Christ became a divine human first century Jew, each Christian who is baptized into Christ and has put on Christ, must become a divine human person of their culture and context. This is why followers of Christ are called Christians. Each Christian is an incarnation of Christ, but the work of Christian missions requires an additional step in the incarnational process.

The first step in the incarnational process for each Christian is his personal journey of transformation into the image of Christ. As Paul says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” (Romans 12:1 ESV) The Christian has put on Christ through baptism and has become a new creation in Him, but there is still a lifelong journey ahead of each Christian in which he becomes ever more deeply a “partaker of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4 ESV). Through this process the whole human person, becomes divine. This is why Orthodox Christians expect to see extraordinary things through the physical bodies of those who have been incorporated deeply into Christ that is the Saints.

Perhaps, most famously St. Seraphim of Sarov was seen by his disciples to shine with the uncreated light. There are many instances of the bodies of the Saints being uncorrupted after death. We regularly visit the monastery of Decani in Kosovo. There, the relics of the founder St. King Stephen are preserved. The body is more than 500 years old and yet it has not decayed. Nothing was done to preserve the body at the time of burial, yet years later it was discovered to be intact and without decay. This is the sustaining divine presence of Christ who was incarnate to an extraordinary degree in this and many other Saints.

So again, the first step in incarnation for each Christian is the process of being conformed to Christ living in us. Christ cannot be incarnate in us if we are not submitted to Him.

Implicit in this first step of incarnation is a second step that leads towards mission. As Archbishop Anastasios has said, “The Christian who is incorporated into Christ…cannot think, feel, will, act or see the world in a different way from Christ….it is impossible for him to be indifferent to the millions who still live as ‘strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.’” (*Mission in Christ’s W*ay pg. 58)

If Christ is truly incarnate in us, we must have a passion for his incarnation in those around us. “The love of Christ within us compels us” (2 Corinthians 5:14). The challenge is that if we would see Christ incarnate in them, we must bridge the gap to take Christ to them. In the case of those closest to us there may be very little gap. If we share language, culture and geographical location with those with whom we would like to share Christ, than it is possible for us to be Christ to them. If these things are not the case, then a process of incarnation must take place in which we become incarnate for them. As St. Paul says “I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” (I Corinthians 9:22 ESV)

As it was for Christ, this process of incarnation must be a process of self-emptying (Philippians 2:7). Those who, for the sake of Christ, would become Christ to those who are far from Him, must incarnate Christ into the language, culture and geographical location of those whom they seek to reach.

I had the blessing of growing up as an MK in Colombia South America. My family worked with a small indigenous group in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the northern coast. The process of making a connection with these people took several years. They lived in Stone Age conditions in remote areas of the mountains, 30 or more miles on rugged trails past the end of the road. My parents made numerous efforts to open relationships with very little success. Finally, through a series of events, because of medical care which my father began to do for the people although he was not formally trained as a physician, an opportunity opened up for my father to visit the central mountain area. At the beginning of this visit he was largely shunned by the people.

A dramatic change happened when he walked out into the banana field and switched from his Western clothes into the distinctive Indian dress. When the Valley chief saw him in Indian dress he began to laugh. He laughed and laughed and could not stop. He could not believe that an “outsider” would actually put on their clothing. This was a first visible step towards incarnation. The chief said to my father, “you say you want to live here”. “You may come to live here if you wear our clothes, eat our food, live in our houses and speak our language”. In a word he was saying, you may come and live here if you are willing to become one of us. He was sure that that would be the end of the conversation, but some months later our family did begin living in that valley 30 miles walk from the end of the road and we did speak their language, live in their houses, eat their food and wear their clothes. 45 years later the work still goes on, that the people of the Sierra Nevada the Santa Marta may know Christ. Many obstacles have been faced and the essential work of translating the Scripture into their language is not yet complete, but there are those who among this people group have decided that “for me to live is Christ” (Philippians 1:21).

The incarnational process for the Christian missionary is not simply a marketing strategy. The Christian missionary does not choose to become incarnate for those to whom he is witnessing Christ simply in order to be more effective. It is in fact an essential mark of truly Christian witness. The Christian missionary is incarnate because Christ has become incarnate for us. We cannot, and must not attempt to witness Christ unless we are willing to go through the process of self-emptying and incarnation on behalf of those to whom we would become a witness. It is worth remembering at this point that the Greek words for witness and martyr are the same. Those who would be true witnesses must be martyrs. This is equally true whether we are martyrs in our own home culture or in a different culture in which we are becoming incarnate.

**Contemporary incarnational challenges**

Today mission is not just the transmission of the gospel across the traditional boundaries of geography, language and culture. For centuries past, although there may always have existed a generation gap, it was possible to assume the socialization of the next generation into the culture and identity of their parents. In traditionally Christian lands this meant that there was an organic process of socialization into Christian life and worldview. There was not a significant need for an incarnational process across the generations, because there was little cultural or linguistic drift. This has dramatically changed. The cultural drift from one generation to the next is accelerating exponentially. This means that the need for deep incarnational reflection is greater than ever. It is not enough for us to reflect on how the gospel will be incarnate in a faraway culture we must now also reflect on how the gospel will be incarnate in our own cultures in the middle of the 21st century.

A failure in this transgenerational incarnational process has resulted in the catastrophic collapse of true Orthodox life in traditionally Orthodox countries. We can no longer assume that the next generation will be socialized into faith.

It may appear that Evangelicals are doing much better in the area of incarnation since they appear to be so much more “in tune with contemporary culture”. I think that this is another topic which could be fruitful in our discussions. I would suggest that perhaps the tendency to align with contemporary culture is overdeveloped in much of evangelicalism. Sometimes it would seem that what is happening is not incarnation, but simply carnation. Christ is not being born into the contemporary culture; the church is being conformed to the culture. There is no *in* in incarnation and what is left is carnival a somewhat fleshy mass in which contemporary culture is very evident, but Christ is less so.

It also, may be worth noting that evangelicalism despite being very culturally adaptable in some ways also exports its religious forms and reproduces them in missionary situations with great fidelity. Orthodox are sometimes considered cultural imperialists because of the uniformity in liturgical practice across Orthodox traditions and around the world. This may or may not be true, but I would also like to note that I have attended evangelical services in multiple traditions on five continents and that there are generally only minor cosmetic differences between them. The worship is much more influenced by the particular tradition to which the church belongs than by the culture in which it exists. Very rarely does local culture genuinely shape the worship experience.

Another great challenge for incarnational mission in the 21st century is the nature of the culture which has become discarnational. This is a huge topic which I hope will be fruitful in our discussions. Christ was incarnate for the salvation of human persons, but today Western culture is rapidly embracing a virtual identity.

This summer, after 17 years of living in Albania, I was able to take my family to Rome for the first time. We faced long lines for entering churches, museums and archaeological sites. As we discussed waiting in the two-hour line to get into the Vatican Museum which includes the Sistine Chapel, my daughter who is 15 said, “It is no problem if we don’t get in because we can look at it online”. While I appreciated her desire to be helpful and positive, I found the underlying premise of her suggestion rather disturbing. There was no need to actually experience the Sistine Chapel, because we could see it on our computer screens without going through the trouble. Unfortunately, this is a trivial example of a much broader trend in which virtual experience is substituting for actual experience. This occurs in many areas which are too numerous and well-known to bear cataloging. To mention only a few, Facebook replaces friendship, video games replace Athletics and adventure, texting replaces conversation and pornography replaces the union of man and wife as one flesh. I do have to say that my children were less enthusiastic about making the post-museum visit to the gelato parlor virtual.

How do we witness the incarnate Christ to the discarnate world? In order to become all things to all people, must we become discarnate in order that we might win the discarnate? This presents a serious, challenge because a discarnate Christ is no Christ at all and a discarnate church is no church.

On one hand, technology has provided us with unparalleled opportunity to communicate the gospel. We must use the information pathways of today as the missionaries of the first century used the Roman road network in order to carry Christ to those who had not yet heard of Him. We must adapt technologies as early Christians adapted the technology of writing in order to produce codexes, because these were more suitable to Christian purposes than the older scrolls.

On the other hand, we must resist an essential remaking of Christian identity in order to be more compatible with technology. In this, we face an unparalleled challenge in Christian history. Never before has the basic human way of being been so radically transformed. I do not believe that the answer is to resist technology per se. The technological transformation of our world is here to stay and it will probably only accelerate. In many ways the transformation of our world through technology has been positive, bringing greater material comfort, health care, greater and more dependable food supplies, lower infant mortality and greater life expectancy but paradoxically as human beings have a greater possibility for humane lives they are also in danger of losing their humanity.

I see three problematic paths that could be taken in this situation. The first would be, an artificial antiquarianism, in which all things old are considered good and things modern and technological are considered evil. The opposite extreme would be a wholesale and un-reflected adoption of modernity. The third, and perhaps more common, is a schizophrenia in which old and new are combined in an artificial way. Old non-technological things would be used in our religious lives, but our “real” life would be virtual and technological.

These three paths are problematic, because none of them achieves true Christian incarnation for the salvation of persons living within the technological world of the 21st century.

I think that part of the reality we face is that 21st century people feel themselves to be consumed by the technology that they have so enthusiastically embraced. We are like the ring wraiths of middle Earth, as we abandon incarnate life we gradually lose our identity and begin to feel thin and transparent. In her book *Alone Together* Sherry Turkle has documented and analyzed the way in which the technology of connection has allowed us to create increasingly broad and superficial relationships, the opposite of incarnate life and relationship.

The evangelical author, Michael Frost, has addressed this issue in his book, *Incarnate*. He wrestles with the challenge of being incarnate Christians in, what he calls an excarnate world. He has suggested a number of tools which can help the church to foster its incarnate life. These include the use of liturgy, fasting and the rhythms of daily hours of prayer and the church calendar. The thing which I find curious about his use of these components is the apparent lack of connection to the historic Christian community which has lived them for 20 centuries. Even more conspicuous is the absence of the sacramental heart of the historic church.

Discarnate life is a danger not simply because it introduces a false and dangerous dualism, but because it destroys the avenues established by God for our salvation. We are saved not simply in our bodies, but through our bodies. The discarnate cannot feed on the flesh and blood of God and therefore this avenue of salvation is closed to them. Those that live without bodies have no particular use for the resurrection of the body. The Orthodox author Joel Miller reflects on this issue in his June 6, blog titled *The Problem with Virtual Communion*, (<http://blogs.ancientfaith.com/joeljmiller/virtual-communion/>)

Our challenge is not simply, like Morpheus, to venture into The Matrix in order to bring people out of it. The real challenge is much larger. How do we as the church live and model the truly incarnate life of Christ within the discarnate virtual age in which we are called to minister? The reality is that all of these challenges will only increase in the coming decades. The church has incarnated Christ in cultures and places around the world and throughout the last 2000 years. The multifaceted culture of mankind is rapidly being unified through technology and communication. Every culture has posed obstacles to its transformation in Christ. Along with the obstacles there are also seeds of the Logos everywhere. How do we find these seeds and nurture them in our age?