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## THE INCARNATION WAS A MISSIONARY JOURNEY

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*Eric E. Wright*

Wherever we scratch the Bible, it bleeds with the missionary passion of God. And as we meditate on the Gospels, unless our sensibilities are thoroughly blunted, we cannot help but note the connection between the willingness of Christ to face the cross and His missionary heartbeat. Indeed, without missionary insight the incarnation is incomprehensible. For why would Christ have left behind the exquisite communion He enjoyed with the Father and the Spirit for the silence of Mary's womb, unless He was moved by missionary compassion?

Since Jesus was a missionary, any genuine desire to exalt Him must breathe fresh fire into our missionary passion. Writing before an Auca spear sent him home to Christ, Jim Elliot reflects this link between love for Christ and missionary motivation: "Missionaries are very human folks, just doing what they are asked. Simply a bunch of nobodies trying to exalt Somebody."<sup>1</sup>

Devotion to Christ fuels missionary fire because Christology and missiology are inseparably linked. Christmas was a missionary journey. Good Friday and Easter memorialize the basis upon which missions will triumph—the historical events which became the essential content of the missionary message. The ascension and session celebrate Christ's assumption of His throne. From this position of authority, He directs history irrevocably toward its missionary culmination. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be

preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). Luke implies that while the Gospels record "what Jesus *began* to do and teach," Acts records the start of what Jesus *continues* to do (Acts 1:1). Missions, then, continues the activity the Son of God began during His incarnation.

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Without taking as their lodestar the principles provided by Christ's missionary lifestyle, however, the strategy devised by missiologists will be flawed. Christ explicitly stated that all missionary activity is to be modeled on the "Sender/Sent One" relationship that He sustained to the Father. "As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you" (John 20:21).<sup>2</sup> Missionary disciples are to pattern the way they move among people after the way Christ came and dwelt among us. The incarnation illustrates God's missionary strategy.

To show how inseparably missions is woven into the fabric of the incarnation, let me highlight some of the ways Christ modeled missionary principles.

### BEING SENT

First, consider this matter of being sent. In John's gospel we find Christ referring more than forty times to the fact that the Father sent Him. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work" (John 9:4). (The work, of course, is gospel proclamation with the goal of reaping an eternal harvest—in a word, missions.) The certainty that He had been sent by the Father gave Jesus confidence in the face of deadly opposition. To His critics He replied, "You do not know Him, but I know Him because I am from Him and He sent Me" (John 7:28-29). (See also 5:24,37; 6:38, 44.)

In His high priestly prayer to the Father He says, "As You sent Me into the world, I have sent them into the world. . . . My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message" (John 17:18,20). Whoever is a disciple is sent by Christ into the world.

A sense of "being sent by God" is foundational to all healthy missionary service. No wonder, then, that the word "missionary" comes from a root meaning "send." Neither missionaries, nor disciples of any stripe, serve well who base their calling on a calculated career move. Throughout their lives missionary disciples can face hostility or indifference, marked success or reap meagre fruit, by drawing fresh strength for the task through reminding themselves that they are "Sent Ones."

### SUBMISSION TO THE FATHER'S WILL

"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work" (John 4:34). "I always do

what pleases Him" (John 8:29). Even when facing death He responded, "Not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

Christ modeled for us the open and obedient attitude toward the Father's will that must characterize missionary disciples. We can continue to "attest and approve what God's will is" only when we offer our "bodies as living sacrifices" in a "spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1-2). Every step is to be taken with an openness to the desires of the Father. This will mean a careful search of the Scriptures at every juncture. It will also mean bathing each step of strategy, each personnel decision, in prayer. "Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed" (Luke 5:16). We pray before and after our meetings almost as if it was a ritual. Missionary organizations do the same. But unless thoughtful prayer is carried on throughout our deliberations, even the most valid missionary organization will fail to rise above the standards of a good business venture.

#### A VOLUNTARY MINISTRY

Although Christ fulfilled the Father's will, yet whatever He did, He did voluntarily. In describing the difference between His ministry and that of a hireling among sheep, Christ says, "The reason My Father loves Me is that I lay down My life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of My own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again" (John 10:17-18). While no one can claim the autonomy Christ possessed, nevertheless missionary work is meant to be the willing response of joyful volunteers. Compulsion, manipulation, or pressure must never be used.

The attitude of Christ described in Philippians 2 is the model of missionary volunteerism. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something

to be grasped [clung to] but [voluntarily] made Himself nothing . . . being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:5-7).

Christ emptied Himself by setting aside, in some mysterious way, the conscious enjoyment of His divine prerogatives. While this passage continues to perplex scholars, at the very least it must reflect the way Christ voluntarily surrendered the independent exercise of His divine attributes and muted His enjoyment of triune fellowship. As truly man, the intimacy of His fellowship with the other members of the Godhead must have been masked in some way. Without voluntarily surrendering this divine privilege, He could hardly have identified with mankind in a genuine way.

#### LEAVING ONE'S OWN PEOPLE

While the Son of God did not cease to be God, nevertheless he did become man. In a similar way, missionaries, when they leave home, don't stop being citizens of their home country, nor do they stop being members of the family they were born into. Missionary activity, however, does involve a leaving behind of one's kith and kin. It involves a voluntary muting of one's ethnic or national pride. The mission field is no place to brag about New York or Toronto. One should note as well that this leaving behind of what is familiar usually means that missionaries must be ready to embrace loneliness. It may also mean muting the use of technological devices uncommon among the target people. The latest theories of church growth and business management may need to be put on the shelf.

#### HUMBLE SERVANTHOOD

Although Christ had a perfect right to demand obedience and obeisance, He became a servant among us. He washed the disciples' feet—and told them to follow His example. Paul applies His example by urging us to "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in

humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3).

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Missionaries have not always resisted the temptation to parade their imagined (or real) superiority. Paternalistic imperialism dogged the footsteps of colonial missionaries, many of whom went out with the "white man's burden to civilize," more than the Master's burden to rescue lost sheep. Genuine missionary ministry requires a humble setting aside of any sense of cultural, educational, technological or economic superiority. We need to become much more in touch with the fallen humanity that we all share.

#### CULTURAL IDENTIFICATION

Christ identified with us by "being made in human likeness," and was "found in appearance as a man . . ."

(Phil. 2:7-8). "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:14). His identification was so extensive that the book of Hebrews states that He has been "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). The extent of His identification enabled Him to "sympathize with our weaknesses."

Successful missionaries identify with those among whom they minister. Speak their language. Try to appreciate their literature. Eat their foods. Live among them. Understand their trials. Feel their griefs. Understand their customs. Modify life's rhythms to harmonize with the ebb and flow of their lives. Perhaps even adopt their dress.

#### COMPASSION

The identification of Christ didn't produce mere pity; it fostered real empathy and compassion. "When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matt. 9:36). Compassion moved Him to heal the sick, teach needful truths, feed the hungry, give sight to the blind, and comfort the grieving (Matt. 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 6:34; Luke 7:13).

Paul writes of our need for "tenderness and compassion. . . . Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:1,4-5). Without compassion missionary service is merely work—hard work at that.

#### SACRIFICE

Christ prepared His disciples to carry on His mission by speaking of His coming death and their own suffering. He urged them not to be ashamed of Him and His words. "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to

save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). He led the way by setting His face to go up to Jerusalem, even though He knew it meant death. "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8)! A twentieth-century missionary martyr accurately applied this concept to his own life. "If Christ died for me, then no sacrifice I make for Him can be too great."

### COMMUNICATION

Although Jesus healed, cast out demons, raised the dead, and fed the hungry, these activities gave way more and more in His second and third years of ministry to teaching. Indeed the Spirit revealed to John at the beginning of his gospel that communication was so central to the mission of the Master that one of his most important names is *Word*. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us" (John 1:1,14). How can we explain the mystery of the eternal *logos* without admitting that God has been eternally committed to communication—and this communication centers on the incarnate Christ.

Missionary activity (or church activity) that fails to focus on, or support in some way, the proclamation of the gospel fails to be either biblical or missionary. Philanthropy, perhaps; missions, no. For this reason teaching, preaching, literature production, Bible translation and evangelism are crucial.

### FOCUS

What puzzles many about the ministry of Christ are His statements about being called to reach the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24). But in these sayings He actually models another crucial aspect of missionary strategy. His earthly

ministry was largely confined to Judea and Galilee. At the beginning of this ministry, He even forbade His disciples from going beyond the confines of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6; 15:24). Of course, part of the reason for His limited scope is explained by His unique mission as the Messiah who came to fulfill the old covenant. But even when Christ broadened His commission to include the whole world, He counseled His disciples to undertake the task in strategic steps—first Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria.

In a similar way, today's missionary church planters must learn to confine their activities to one culture, or fail as missionaries. The world can be reached only one geographical area at a time, one language group at a time. To try to do more, with rare exceptions, is to fail to establish deeply rooted, culturally sensitive churches able to disciple converts and evangelize culturally nearby people. Any person who is so caught up by a vision of reaching the whole world for Christ that he races off in a hundred different directions, cannot but produce a shallow result. Missions, while universal in scope, is particularistic in practice.

### UNIVERSAL VISION

Although Christ largely confined His ministry to Israel, His teaching and actions planted the seeds of His broader mission. He ministered to the Samaritan woman and the people of Samaria, the Syrophoenician woman, the Roman centurion of Capernaum, the Gadarene, and the deaf man of Decapolis (John 4:1-42; Matt. 15:21-28; 8:5-13; Mark 5:1-20; 7:31-37). Angels announced His birth, giving "good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (Luke 2:10). Simeon praised God, saying that the child in his arms was "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Your people Israel" (Luke 2:32). John the Baptizer declared that Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

Christ said that the temple “will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Mark 11:17). He called believers “the salt of the earth . . . the light of the world” (Matt. 5:13-14). In His model prayer we are taught to pray, “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). He specifically predicts that Gentiles will overtake Jews in the kingdom (Matt. 21:43; Luke 13:28-29). Parables indicate that the field is the world (Matt. 13:36-43). John multiplies references to the *kosmos* as the focus of God’s love and the target of Christ’s mission (John 1:9, 29; 3:16-17, 19; 4:42; 6:33; 12:47; 16:8; 17:21).

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As the Master, so the disciple. Followers of Christ are to be world Christians captivated by a vision of the whole world. The prophecy of Revelation throbs within them. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb . . . They cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev. 7:9-10).

Christ laid down the broad parameters of missionary work. He also modeled how disciples should live. The two are linked. The main implications of what I have written

concern cross-cultural missionaries. There is, however, no hard and fast distinction between what applies to career missionaries and what applies to devoted disciples. A distinction has arisen, because missions has been relegated to the periphery of church life.

In reality a continuum exists between missionary passion and obedient discipleship. For this reason, the steps a missionary candidate takes to confirm or deny his call are the same steps an obedient disciple takes to please the Master. The principles—with diverse applications—apply all along the continuum. Of course, each of us will find ourselves at different locations on this continuum.

Let me explain. Every disciple is a “sent one.” All of us are to voluntarily embrace the Father’s will and live a life of compassionate and humble servanthood. Every believer is to expect sacrifice in the process of taking up his or her cross. No disciple should have a parochial vision that limits his concern for the whole world. And yet each of us needs to focus on a nearby ministry where our own spiritual gifts can be used. When we approach people, we need to lay aside our agendas so we can identify with them. This will mean learning to listen. What we hear will guide us in choosing to communicate that portion of the truth that is appropriate to their level of preparation and their personal need. Communication of the gospel will be central in the lives of our churches.

So missions and discipleship are not unconnected. Throughout the ages enthusiasm for missions has risen or fallen on the degree of devotion believers have had for Christ. The missionary passion of the Moravians has seldom been equalled and never exceeded since the days of the New Testament. Their missionary battle cry reflected their fervor: “To win for the Lamb that was slain, the reward of His sufferings.”<sup>3</sup> Count Zinzendorf, their great leader, exclaimed, “I have but one passion—tis He, and He only.”<sup>4</sup>

Over a century ago Andrew Murray wrote about the *Key to the Missionary Problem*. He traced the problem to "lack of heart. The enthusiasm of the kingdom is missing because there is so little enthusiasm for the King."<sup>5</sup> Clearly, the main question we need to keep asking ourselves is, "How much do I love Christ?" And since the incarnation was a missionary event, if we really love Christ the sparks from our passion cannot help but kindle a missionary bonfire.

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#### *Notes*

1. Elisabeth Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd., 1958), 46.
2. Scripture references are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).
3. Andrew Murray, *Key to the Missionary Problem* (Fort Washington, Pennsylvania: Christian Literature Crusade reprint, 1979), 44.
4. *Ibid.*, 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.