

Faith Pulpit

Incarnational Preaching

Incarnation is most often discussed as a theological term describing God's Son, Jesus Christ, clothing Himself with humanity. John's description of the Incarnation is, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."¹ Jesus was God living temporarily among men in a human body, for the purpose of revealing God and His redemption plan to mankind. Paul's more vivid discussion of Christ's incarnation was, "Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; But made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men."² All through Scripture God has made the revelation of Himself paramount. In the garden He walked and communed with Adam; to Abraham and Joshua He came as "the angel of the Lord;" to Moses He unveiled His glory and uncovered His back parts; to the children of Israel in the desert He was the cloud by day and pillar of fire by night. Jesus sent the disciples to preach and teach the gospel, the revelation of God's loving grace in redemption. Even today the primary purpose of preaching is the unveiling of God's person and plan in the exposition of His Word. Preachers, along with all believers, are indwelt by God's Holy Spirit as living demonstrations of Who and What God is.

Mark Friedman is responsible for the concept of teaching as incarnation.³ His approach graphically relates the Bible to people by identifying with their occupation, environment, religion, political struggle, economy, sorrows, and joys.⁴ Even though some of his ideas are interesting, even challenging, the idea of incarnation is not about relating to different cultures, but about revealing God and His redemption plan to all cultures. Friedman's examples of incarnation as relating to different cultures included John Howard Griffin, who dyed himself black and traveled through the South so that he could relate to the black community.⁵ He also used George Jordan's Koinonia Farms in Georgia as an example of relating to other cultures by rewriting the gospel story. According to Jordan's version, Jesus was born not in Bethlehem but in Gainesville, Georgia; Jerusalem is Atlanta, and Rome is Washington, D.C.; and Jesus' inner circle of disciples are Rock (Peter), Jim (James), and Jack (John).⁶ Jordan's interpretive translation of the Good Samaritan portrays the priest as a white preacher, the

Levite as a white song leader, and the Samaritan as a black man. This portrayal seems to go far beyond simply relating with people of different cultures; it misinterprets the Scripture and misses the concept of incarnation, which is the living revelation of God.

“Incarnational preaching” means much more than relating to differing cultures, ages, interests, etc. Relational preaching is certainly important in preaching if people are to understand the message as it is applied to them. But incarnational preaching involves the very character and content of the preacher’s message.

Incarnational Preaching Is Revelational in Character.

When Jesus preached, people saw the reality of God’s person—so much so that when Jesus finished His ministry He could pray, “Glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify Thee: As thou hast given Him power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him. And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest me out of the world.”⁷

When Jesus preached, God was glorified, revealing the distinguishing excellence of His person. God’s glory is at the heart of incarnational preaching. Preaching should never turn attention to the preacher; he is only God’s called spokesperson. Remember Paul’s message to the Corinthian church about this subject? “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos but ministers [servants] by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.”⁸ In Paul’s preaching, God is the revealed One, the only exalted One.

When Jesus preached, God’s message of eternal life was revealed. This was more than the gospel of salvation. Jesus said that eternal life was to know God and Jesus Christ personally, intimately.

Incarnational preaching, then, is preaching that brings God’s holy being to men in a way that glorifies Him.

Incarnational Preaching Is Inspirational in Its Spirit.

There was something very special about the preaching and teaching of Jesus that captivated the hearts and minds of His listeners. Even as a child he sat with the doctors in the temple, listening and asking questions in a way that the leaders were astonished by His understanding and answers.⁹ When He preached, the crowds thronged to hear His message. The chief priests and Pharisees declared, “Never man spake like this man.”¹⁰ Think of the different people who were moved to respond to His preaching. There were religious leaders like Nicodemus, immoral women like the woman of Samaria,

fishermen like Peter and John who left their livelihood to follow Him, and publicans like Zacchaeus. All kinds of people in all types of situations were changed by Jesus' ministry. He inspired people to turn from evil and error to righteousness and truth. This was God in flesh reaching out to mankind in all of man's humanness.

The Apostles, filled with the Holy Spirit of God, went into the world preaching God's redemption plan in Jesus. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter began in the Old Testament and moved to the present day, preaching God's plan through Jesus Christ. Hardened Jews of many tongues were "pricked in their hearts,"^{[11](#)} and three thousand responded for salvation, were baptized, and were added to the church.^{[12](#)}

Everywhere that the Apostle Paul went, he preached in a way that turned people to Christ and God. His dynamic spirit awakened Jews in the synagogues to who Jesus really was, and the people wanted him to return again and again so that they might learn more about Jesus.^{[13](#)} Greeks in Athens, standing in their most sacred places, knew the fire of God's Holy Spirit as Paul preached of the true God "that made the world and all things therein, seeing He is the Lord of heaven and earth."^{[14](#)} God's majesty and message of saving grace was declared in such a way that hearts, lives, cities, and nations were moved. Now THAT is incarnational preaching that inspires people to turn to God, because it is empowered by the Holy Spirit of God!

Preaching today may still bear the mark of incarnation. This is not to say that preachers are like Jesus, God in the flesh, but that we do have the indwelling, filling power of the Holy Spirit of God. Through His enabling, preaching will do more than struggle through social and cultural issues. It will reveal the greatness and glory of God in such a way that the hearts and lives of people will be changed for eternity.

Works Cited

1. John 1:14.
2. Philippians 2:6,7.
3. Friedman, Matt, The Master Plan of Teaching (Wheaton, Victor Books, 1990).
4. Ibid., 35.
5. Griffin, John Howard, Black Like Me.
6. Friedman, Matt, 38.
7. John 17:1–6.
8. 1 Corinthians 3:5–7.
9. Luke 2:46–47.
10. John 7:46.
11. Acts 2:37.
12. Acts 2:38–41.
13. Acts 13:14–45; 14:1–3; 17:1–4, 10–12, 16,17; 18:4.
14. Acts 17:24.

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