

On Earth As It Is In Heaven – A Practical Theology of Incarnation

1. Beginning with the creation account, God continued to demonstrate His intent for His creation to become sacred space in and through human mediation and administration. The incarnation amplified this truth by revealing the nature of the divine-human relationship at the center of this plan: *God would be fully and manifestly present and operative in His creation by joining Himself to His human creature in and through Jesus, the singular Image-Son.* Thus Paul's declaration that God's work in the world is directed toward "summing up" everything in His creation in His Son unto His ultimate goal to be "all in all."

The incarnation underscores the truth that God is known in His creation in terms of His essential relation to man, even as man is known in terms of his essential relation to God. This truth, in turn, points to a crucial corollary that is commonly missed by Christians: ***the living God is fully disclosed in and through incarnation.*** *This means that one must begin with Jesus as the New Testament reveals Him in order to rightly discern the God of the Scriptures.*

- a. The theological task is typically approached in the opposite fashion. That is, the process usually starts with developing a catalog of attributes and qualities of deity that are ascribed to the God of the scriptures, and then seeking to impose that definition on the person of Jesus as Himself "fully God." The historical christological controversies generally reflect this approach, as do other contemporary doctrinal discussions, as for instance those concerning kenosis and the omniscience of the incarnate Son.
- b. But incarnation – and the Scriptures – insist that one obtains a true knowledge of the living God from knowing Jesus the Messiah. *Rather than seeking to impose abstract divine attributes onto Jesus in order to vindicate His true deity, we need to instead perceive and discern God through the process of rightly discerning the man Jesus.*

However strange or shocking this may seem, this is precisely what Jesus meant when He insisted that seeing Him is seeing His Father. Notably, it was John who recorded this statement (John 14:8-9), which is consistent with his intent to demonstrate that the incarnate Messiah is the exegesis (interpretation) of the living God. * 1:14-18; cf. Col. 1:15, 2:9

2. Incarnation is concerned with *God unto man*, but also *man unto God* – and not just in terms of communication and outward relation, but *ontological union*. Again, this concept is central to the Scripture's *sanctuary* motif and the way it has been fulfilled in Jesus.
 - a. As He pledged, the God of Israel has once again established His habitation among His people, not in a physical structure in their midst, but by taking up their human existence in the man Jesus of Nazareth. As the incarnate Word, Jesus is the true sanctuary of the living God. He is the man in whom God's design for human beings has been realized; He is the true image-son whose relationship with the Creator-Father is determined and defined by the absolute intimacy of "I in you and you in me."
 - b. But what Jesus fulfilled in Himself was for the sake of all people. He became the Last Adam by putting to death Adamic humanness in order to inaugurate a new human race in Himself – a family of image-children sharing His life and likeness. *Incarnation, then, is the explanation for how Yahweh intended to fulfill His promise to gather all the nations to His sanctuary to commune with Him there.* * cf. Isaiah 2:1-4; Zech. 2, 8:19-23 with John 12:23-32, 14:1-23; Eph. 2; 1 Pet. 2:1-10

- c. This underscores that Jesus is not merely an example to be followed, but the very substance of human existence. *He uniquely embodies true humanness – the humanness for which God created man, so that authentic human existence is a matter of incorporation into Him, the incarnate and glorified image-son, not imitating Him.* Jesus is Man unto mankind, but as Last Adam; He is the first-fruit of God’s new creation.
3. And so, rightly understanding the nature and outcome of incarnation puts the whole matter of *personal salvation* in an entirely different light.
 - a. Again, salvation is typically viewed in forensic terms as God addressing a person’s violation of their obligation of obedience to His revealed standard (“law”). To be “saved” is to be cleansed from the guilt and defilement of disobedience, forgiven, and brought into a right standing with God. So the concept of “new birth” or regeneration is generally understood in terms of new capacity and resource for obedience, not ontological union with God – being taken up in God’s own life so as to become “one spirit” with Him through union with the resurrected Messiah through His indwelling Spirit. * 1 Cor. 6:17
 - b. But if personal salvation involves becoming “one spirit” with the triune God, *it involves the loss of one’s independent existence.* To be taken up in the life of God by His Spirit is to be joined in that same Spirit to all other Christians. In Paul’s words, the Messiah is *one*, but as He has *many members* unified to become one body by sharing in the one Spirit. * 1 Cor. 12:12-13; cf. Eph. 4:1-6
 - c. And given the preeminent place of the concept of *sanctuary* in God’s design for His creation as it has been fulfilled in the incarnate Messiah, it’s not surprising that this same imagery is employed in relation to the individual and corporate aspects of salvation: Believers are built together as living stones to form the one dwelling place of the living God (Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Pet. 2:4-5). *This is a radical departure from the personal and individualistic perspective that characterizes contemporary evangelism and the way people think about their own salvation and its goal.*
 4. The incarnation is critical to understanding the nature and goal of personal salvation (what it means to be “saved”), and so it is with the matter of *sanctification*. Where salvation is understood in forensic terms, so also is sanctification (when defined as the process of living out and progressing in one’s salvation). Put simply, if salvation entails entrusting oneself in faith to the One who has perfectly kept God’s law, then sanctification involves devoting oneself to that same sort of obedience, but now in the power of the Spirit. Thus Calvin’s “third use” of the “Moral Law” and Reformed Theology’s emphasis on its central principles of “law” and “gospel” for Christian sanctification as well as evangelism.

But if salvation involves being taken up in God’s life through union with Christ by His Spirit (Eph. 2:1-6; Col. 3:1-4), then sanctification is the process of perfecting that ontological union and God’s goal in effecting it. Rightly viewed in terms of incarnation, sanctification is concerned with *christiformity*: conformity to the person of the resurrected and glorified Messiah, not increasing conformity to a divine standard. And conformity to Christ is full participation in His consummate, glorified human existence through the transforming work of His Spirit. The resurrected and enthroned Messiah is man as God intends – man as His regal and priestly image-son animated, informed, and led by His Spirit. But again, this glorified man is the *Last Adam*, so that His destiny and inheritance are ordained for all of God’s image-children. * ref. 1 Cor. 15:35-49; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; also Rom. 8:9-39; Heb. 2

- a. From this perspective, it is clear that Christian “works” are neither *salvific* (contributing to one’s salvation) nor *testamentary* in the sense that upright behavior and lifestyle are sure evidence of one’s salvation. Christians are indeed called to “good works” and their faith is attested by them, but as those works are the outflow of their renewal in Christ.
 - b. Put simply, Christian “good works” are the manifestation of Christ’s life and the continuation of His work in the world in the power of His Spirit (ref. Eph. 2:8-9 within the larger context). They are the works of *christiformity*, and so affirm new creation and serve its fruitfulness as the work of God in and through His faithful image-children. Thus they are nothing more than the Christian living into who he really is. Hence Paul’s characteristic rebuke, “*Don’t you know who you are?*” Christians aren’t called to behave properly, they are called to be true – to be who they are. * Rom. 6:1-16; 1 Cor. 3:16-23, 6:1-20, 9:1-27; cf. also 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Gal. 3:1-9, 4:19-31, 5:18-26; Phil. 3:1-21; etc.
5. Thus incarnation informs and directs Christian *mission*. The incarnation, lived out in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, reveals God’s loving commitment to His creation (John 3:16-17) and the destiny He has appointed for it (Eph. 1:8-9). The Father sent the Son into the world in view of His determination to flood the earth with His loving presence and wise and just rule, and Jesus then entrusted His own commission to His disciples; He would carry out His mission in the world – the mission first covenanted to Abraham and then fleshed out in Israel’s history – through those in whom He now lives through His Spirit (cf. John 20:19-23 with 14:18-20, 15:12-16:15; ref. also Matthew 28:18-20). *Indeed, Jesus punctuated this core truth with His “high-priestly prayer” that was the climax of His final instruction to His disciples before His death.* * John 17:1-26
- a. This, then, shows that Christian mission isn’t about “soul-winning,” but the ministration and cultivation in the world of new creation and its fruits. This work clearly involves proclaiming to people the “good news” of God’s triumph in Christ, but not as a salvation formula for getting them into heaven. Rather, the gospel proclaims Christ’s lordship as king over the inaugurated kingdom of God’s new creation (Acts 17:1-7). Thus the gospel calls people to forsake the old order and its pattern of humanness defined by the creational curse and become truly human by embracing life in the Last Adam.

This is what Jesus meant when He challenged His disciples to *take up their cross* and follow Him. He wasn’t calling them to an ascetic lifestyle, but to follow Him in condemning and opposing Adamic humanness as He had done by His faithful sonship that was soon to culminate at Calvary. *He was calling them to self-denial that consists in renouncing and forsaking one’s pseudo-life under the curse to find one’s authentic life – the life for which the Creator created him.* * ref. Mat. 10:34-39, 16:21-25; Luke 9:18-24; cf. Paul’s instruction to the churches in Col. 2:20-23 and 1 Tim. 4:1-6

- b. And if the Christian mission consists in the “good works” of new creation (Eph. 2:10), it pertains to the *non-human* creation as much as the human. The gospel proclaims Jesus’ lordship over all creation; in Him Yahweh has taken up His everlasting reign as King over all the earth (Isaiah 52:7-10; ref. also Isaiah 61:1-11 with Luke 4:14-21), and this obligates His subjects to uphold and administer His lordship in every arena of life. Indeed, vice-regency over the earth is precisely the role for which man was created. Thus Christian mission cannot be reduced to “spiritual” concerns, for the Spirit who imparts salvation is the *creator* Spirit whose work of re-creation is directed toward all creation being renewed, gathered up, and glorified in the Image-Son.