

TRANSFORMATION: THE INCARNATION APPROACH

STUDY 11: RADICAL IDENTIFICATION

Introduction

Examples of people who have given up everything to identify with the poor can be found in all ages, places, and traditions. Many of these are found in the witness of Christianity for the simple reason that Jesus, its founder, offers the greatest example of selfless love and sacrificial service.

Example 1: Siddharta Gautama. Born in Nepal as the Sakya prince and member of the warrior or ruling class, at 29 he renounced the luxury and comfort of the palace and the ties of family and became an ascetic in search of the meaning of life.

After many years of study and deprivation he experienced "enlightenment and soon gathered disciples to whom he proclaimed the four noble truths and the cause of suffering. His followers pronounced him as "the Buddha."

Example 2: Pandita Ramabai. Pandita Ramabai was born into an orthodox Brahmin family that strictly followed caste rules. Her father, however, broke tradition by teaching his wife and Sudra caste Hindus, Sanskrit and the Puranas. Pandita also learned to read and write. After the death of her parents and husband she dedicated herself to the uplifting of women and the poor.

She established a mission center where 2,000 orphans and child-widows were cared for, began schools, and teacher training programs, introduced braille to India, raised funds for famine relief, pioneered woman's hospital and the training of lady doctors, established skills training programs for women, and was the first woman to translate the Bible into another language.

Incarnation

For Jesus the Son of God the incarnation meant stepping down to experience human life. What did Jesus give up? The biblical evidence gives a clear picture.

1) At His Birth. "Though He was rich yet for your sakes He became poor." (2 Cor. 8:9) "And they found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger." (Lk. 2:16) "An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy Him.' And he took the child and His mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod." (Mt. 2:13-14) "When he heard Archelaus reigned in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee." (Mt. 2:22)

2) In His Ministry. "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air their nests, but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Mt. 8:20) "They took Him out of the city and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down headlong." (Lk. 4:29)

"A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and his own house." (Mt. 13:57)
"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and follow me." (Mt. 16:24)

3) At His Death. "As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside and said to them, 'Behold we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified.'" (Mt. 20:17-19)

"He began to be sorrowful, even to death. And He fell on His face and prayed 'My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will but as thou wilt.'" (Mt. 26:38-39)

"They stripped Him, and planted a crown of thorns on His head and mocked Him." (Mt. 27:28-29).

"They led Him to a place called Golgotha and crucified Him" (Mt. 27:33).

"And Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" (Mt. 27:46)

Can Christians Copy Jesus?

Profile 1: Father Damien. Father Damien was a priest who devoted his life to missionary work among the Hawaiian lepers. He was not only their pastor and physician but he improved their food and water supply and housing conditions. And he formed two orphanages. The greatest success in his ministry came after he contracted leprosy in 1884. Then the people said, "He is one of us. See how he loves us." Father Damien refused the chance of a cure because it would have meant leaving his leper friends. He died on the island after 16 years of selfless ministry.

Profile 2: Albert Schweitzer. For the first 30 years of his life Albert Schweitzer devoted himself to learning, gaining doctorates in philosophy and theology, preaching and writing, and performing music. In 1905 he resigned his university posts, became a medical doctor and spent the rest of his life in French Equatorial Africa where he built a hospital and leper colony. He returned to Europe periodically to raise money through lectures and organ recitals and to receive the Nobel peace prize, immediately donating the money to his hospital at Lambaréne on the Zambezi river.

Debate the statement: "To help the poor we must become one with the poor!"

Jesus and Poverty

The problem with poverty in Asia and Africa is that it is mulch-factored. The same people who are illiterate are also more often sick, landless, and poor. Everything works against them. They are constantly left behind in the competition for employment and resources. They have no options, no choice. The cycle of poverty can be pictured:

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To improve the quality of life of the poor, the cycle needs to be broken at more than one point. That is the major reason why integrated or holistic development programs usually prove more effective. At what points can the cycle of poverty best be broken?

Christian Resources to Uplift the Poor

Using the dimensions of experience in the following list, state what Christians have to offer the poor:

- a) physically
- b) spiritually
- c) mentally
- d) emotionally
- e) socially
- f) economically
- g) politically

Preparing for Ministry Among the Poor

What essential quality was Paul referring to when he wrote "Have this mind among yourself which you have in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5)?

Why is knowledge of the Bible important? Does ministry to the poor require a special call of God or is it a general obligation?

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Complete this ladder of ministry among the poor by adding five more general principles and specific actions.

The Meaning of Incarnation

A dictionary suggest two definitions of incarnation. One is the taking of a human form by a god or spirit, and two, any person or thing serving as the embodiment of a quality or concept. The first definition describes Jesus, the second should characterize his followers. Christians today cannot do what Jesus did in terms of incarnation but they are to reflect His attitudes and priorities.

For Jesus, incarnation meant:

- a) Leaving heaven to come to earth.
- b) Divesting Himself of all the power and knowledge of God.
- c) Experiencing the limitations of childhood.
- d) Experiencing life as a refugee.
- e) Learning a trade.
- f) living in a rural, backward community.
- g) Befriending outcasts and sinners
- h) Having no income or family home.
- i) Facing death.

Construct a similar list describing what incarnation might mean for Christians today.

Incarnation and Communication

The incarnation is the ideal model of communication for several reasons.

- a) Communication through incarnation is specific to a context. Jesus did not just appear anywhere, to anyone, at any time but to a particular people, in one time and place.
- b) Incarnation means involvement in a context. Jesus acted the truth as well as spoke it. He involved Himself in every aspect of the lives of the people he sought to help.
- c) Incarnation takes the cultural context seriously. Jesus involved Himself in the problems, debates, issues, and struggles of the people. He debated with Pharisees and Sadducees on how to be obedient to God. He shared the insults and discrimination felt by outcasts, Samaritans, women, and the poor.
- d) Incarnation means giving priority to people and relationships. Jesus chose not to write a book or pronounce a law but to communicate in face to face encounters with the needy.
- e) Incarnation means actions as well as words. Jesus communicated by what he did and who He was, as well as by what He said.
- f) Incarnation means love and service. It is the opposite of detachment. It is compassionate and complete involvement in a spirit that says, "I am here and I care." Incarnation is the best form of communication because it is speaking to a situation from the inside.

Learning the incarnation approach from Jesus means Christians too must commit themselves to a particular context; they should share the concerns and the identity of the people they serve, they ought to go to them not as masters or experts but as friends and servants. Then the people will want to hear the message of Jesus.

In what ways does the following comment from Albert Schweitzer describe incarnation?

Open your eyes and look for some person, or some work for the sake of humanity, which needs a little time, a little friendliness, a little sympathy, a little toil. See if there is not some place where you may invest yourself.

The Mission of Mother Theresa

Mother Theresa is known throughout the world for her loving ministry to the destitute and dying in Calcutta. She has been honored by presidents, visited by the Pope, and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Her life began in Albania where it is a crime to be a Christian. As a young nun she arrived in India and, out of a deep concern for the absolute poor who crowded the city and lived and died on the sidewalks, began a ministry of compassion which became the Sisters of Charity. She is inspired by the words of Jesus who said, "Inasmuch as you do it unto one of these the least of my brothers and sister you do it unto me" (Mt. 25:40). She also knows that in obeying the second Great Commandment to "love our neighbors as ourselves" it is possible to come to understand the true meaning of the first commandment, "to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul."

Everyday, prayers precede the preparation of food and the giving of medicine. Everyone, even those whose bodies or minds can no longer perform their proper functions, are treated with dignity, love, and gentleness. When the famous British author Malcolm Muggeridge visited the Home of the Dying he was sure the building was filled with a divine glow. She is called *Mother* Theresa not just because she is the head of an order which has spread across the world but because she is loved by all. In India she is regarded as a saint and has received the country's highest award for community service.

Name and briefly describe another person who has followed Jesus in selflessness and service.

A Visit to Calcutta

When song writer and TEAR Fund promoter Garth Hewitt visited Calcutta in 1984, he met with mother Theresa and others who had dedicated their lives to helping the poor. He wrote this song "Road to freedom to describe his experience and impressions."

The sights that fly before your eyes
Can simply drag you down.
I lived a year in Calcutta
The night I hit town.
Those sights you see they freeze your brain;
You can't even say a prayer,
but they don't need my pity
They don't need my sympathy
Let each one have his dignity
And a chance to be on the road...

On the road to freedom,
On the road to freedom,

Let the poor man stand up tall
Give him back his pride.
On the road to freedom,
On the road to freedom,
Give him back humanity'
Let him know his worth
In his Father's eyes.

And in Calcutta late at night
A million coal fires burn;
Smoke gets in your throat and eyes
And heat and soul in turn.
Your spirit weeps at pain-filled streets;
I never knew I'd cry.
But they don't need my pity
They don't need my sympathy
Let each one have his dignity
And a chance to be on the road...

'God's Spirit is upon me now'
So Jesus told them all,
'Because He has appointed me
To bring good news to the poor.
He sent me to bring liberty
To set the captive free.
To fight against oppression.
Poverty which is aggression
To bring righteousness and beauty,
And a chance to be on the road...

The following article, "900,000 Said to Live on India's Sidewalks," describes poverty in India.

About 900,000 people live on the sidewalks of India's two biggest cities and others of the poor who are able to find shelter have little access to drinking water or toilets, according to a survey issued Wednesday. About 800,000 people live on the pavements of Calcutta and 100,000 sleep on the streets of Bombay, said the study by the All-India Slum Dwellers' Welfare Association. The survey was issued two weeks before authorities in Bombay are scheduled to start demolishing illegal shantytowns and clearing people off the sidewalks. (AP, Bombay, Oct 16, 1985)

Incarnation Today

The incarnation is still the most powerful sign God has ever given that He loves mankind and can help him in his needs and troubles. From these two comments by contemporary Christian writers it is obvious there is a need for an understanding and application of the principal of incarnation. Joseph Donders states:

Christ is the Son of God, that is to say, the unique, never before occurred, and

afterwards never repeated or surpassed manifestation of divinity.

Edwin W. Smith (1907-1957) an expert in African religion, pointed out that God remains somewhat mysterious in the African worldview. God is considered to be far away, notwithstanding the fact that god continuously gives life to the world and to humankind. In the African vision God cannot be completely discharged from some responsibility for the sickness and death in this world. In a sense, God is too often absent. How often were Ugandans heard to say during the bloody regime of General Amin and its aftermath, 'God forgot our country, God is forgetting us.' Misfortunes is sometimes connected with a wrong done, but that is not always the case.

According to many African myths, God left this world and keeps at a distance. There are many stories explaining this distance. A typical explanation is the one the Ewe people in Ghana tell. They say that in the beginning God lied very near to the human family. There was one thing God could not stand: the smoke of their fires. When human beings increased and burned more and more fires, God got too much smoke in His eyes and went higher up in heaven. Humanity did not pay any attention and burned more and more fires, so God went higher and higher and farther and farther away. In other stories the reasons given for God's disappearance are the perpetual quarreling of humanity, the noise of maize grinding, and other polluting human activities. (Non-Bourgeois Theology, 1985, p. 31)

How distant or near is God considered to be in your community? What reasons do people give for their conclusions? Is the verse from the Koran, "We verily created a man and we know what his soul whispereth to him, and we are nearer to him than his jugular vein" (50/16), the equivalent to the incarnation of Jesus?

Leonardo Boff explains how the church should apply the incarnation:

Christianity can be understood as a prolongation of God's incarnation process. Just as the Son took everything upon himself in order to liberate everything so the Christian faith seeks to become incarnate in everything in order to transfigure everything. It is in this sense that we say: everything belongs in some way to the Kingdom of God because everything is objectively connected with God and is called to belong to the reality of God's kingdom.

Thus the Christian faith is not just interested in those realities as described spiritual and supernatural. It also places a value on the material and the historical. All of these pertain to one and the same schema of incarnation by which the divine penetrates the human and the human enters into the divine. Against the background of this understanding, the Christian community commits itself to the integral liberation of human beings, not just of their spiritual dimension. Even their corporeality (and here we refer to the economic, social, political, and cultural infrastructure in their fullest sense) is 'called' to absolute realization in God and to become a part of the kingdom of the Father. As a consequence, the Christian community, especially in recent years, has committed itself more and more to the liberation of the oppressed, to those

condemned 'to remain at the margin of life, experiencing hunger, chronic illness, illiteracy, poverty...' (1983, p. 2)

How does your church prolong the incarnation?

Incarnation and Servanthood

A reflection on Philippians 2:5-11.

v. 5 Jesus asks the most simple yet profound thing of us – to think and act as He did.

v. 6 What a giant stride it was for god's Son to step out of eternity into time.

To give up divinity with all its privileges,

To lay aside omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence,

To become dependent as a little baby.

To be a refugee, a local tradesman in a small rural town of a tiny middle eastern country in an age of poverty and violence.

v. 7 He made friends of those others avoided -

men who smelt of fish,

women who'd sold their bodies,

tax collectors who'd mortgaged their souls.

And he loved them with all His heart.

He stood tall to challenge injustice and hypocrisy in the temple.

He stooped low to wash the disciples' feet.

v. 8 He was just like us and yet He wasn't...

for the quality of His love was much more profound than ours.

He did nothing to protect His own status or comfort

He spared no effort to reach the suffering and oppressed

He avoided no danger to articulate God's truth and to demonstrate His love.

He died a young man on a cruel wooden cross for no sin of His own, but suspended between heaven and earth with arms outstretched to embrace the world, He prayed for you and me, to perpetrators and the procrastinators, the sensuous and the serious, the selfish and the simple, that we might be forgiven.

v. 9 He lives now in God's heaven as the most honored of sons and His name is echoed around the world.

v. 10 As the finest example of a life totally dedicated to the compassionate sharing of truth and love.

v. 11 To meet Him is to worship Him. To know Him is to serve Him. To experience Him is to proclaim His majesty everywhere as the One 'who was rich yet for our sakes became poor that through His poverty we might become rich.'

Have the mind of Jesus. (Bellingham, 1984)