

## Christ is the only incarnation: Appropriate use of incarnation language

Sean McGeever, ETS Far West Region Meeting April 2018

The term “incarnational” has been used casually by many Evangelical ministries, more carefully by missiologists, and less frequently by theologians. The satire of the Babylon Bee points to the unbounded way people think about ministry when it reported: “Local Church Declares Every Possible Activity A Ministry.”<sup>1</sup> This paper aims to show, in a way that benefits from recent criticism of the term, that the term “incarnational” can be articulated in a way that coheres with proper Christology. It does so, first, by examining the origin and meaning of the terms incarnation, incarnate, and incarnational. Second, the paper suggests five models of incarnational ministry which enable, third, the proposal of three theses regarding the theological language of the incarnation.

Christians have been motivated for two millennia by Christ’s words to his disciples: “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” (Jn. 20:21) In the sending of youth workers to young people, the incarnational method has been criticized. A prominent youth ministry textbook states: “incarnational ministry has been abused by youth ministers who interpret it to mean that they are the incarnate ones”.<sup>2</sup> Worldwide mission work has also employed the concept of incarnational ministry. The Stuttgart Consolation of the World Council of Churches declared in 1987 that “We live by the gospel of the incarnate Lord; this implies that the gospel has to become incarnated in ourselves, the ‘evangelists.’”<sup>3</sup> Subsequent missiologists and mission workers have been critical of the uncritical use of the concept of incarnational ministry. Toren argues that the incarnational model is deficient because it is “unrealistic, potentially paternalistic, inappropriate in the light of globalization and post-modern understandings of culture, and... it doesn’t sufficiently respect the particularity of the incarnation of Christ.” Theologians have been far less hospitable towards the term. Billings writes that critics of incarnational ministry point to missiological problems that are actually Christological in origin. He states: “Although missiological literature has many references to incarnational ministry, there are relatively few theological defenses of this notion.”<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth’s theology is an example of what many theologians would echo regarding this

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<sup>1</sup> The Babylon Bee, “Local Church Declares Every Possible Activity A Ministry,” *The Babylon Bee*, March 18, 2016, <http://babylonbee.com/news/church-declares-every-possible-activity-ministry/>.

<sup>2</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, Chap Clark, and Dave Rahn, *Starting Right: Thinking Theologically about Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Youth Specialties/Zondervan Pub. House, 2001), 234.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization Volume 1: Basic Statements 1974-1991* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 66.

<sup>4</sup> J. Todd Billings, “Incarnational Ministry and Christology: A Reappropriation of the Way of Lowliness,” *Missiology: An International Review* 32, no. 2 (April 2004): 188.

topic. Barth writes: “We must not say anything which would even in the slightest degree equate the Christian with God and thus declare him to be the subject of the history and therefore himself the reconciler or co-reconciler of the world.”<sup>5</sup> Barth’s preferred term for the role, or vocation, of Christians is that of “witness” or “minister.”<sup>6</sup> However, an appropriate usage of the term incarnational is possible. Guder suggests that, “An incarnational interpretation of Christian witness is an attempt to allow the Second Article, the doctrine of Christ, to define and shape our theology of the Third Article, the Holy Spirit and the church.”<sup>7</sup> This paper is an exercise to attempt what Guder suggests, particularly through the lens of Christology. To do so, the paper now turns to the key terms being discussed.

### **Defining the terms: Incarnate, Incarnation, and Incarnational**

The noun “incarnation” and verb “incarnate” are not found in modern English translations of the Bible. The church fathers<sup>8</sup> built upon the word “flesh” [sarx] to capture the concept of Jesus becoming flesh, exemplified in Jn. 1:14 [sarx egeneto, σάρξ ἐγένετο (γίνομαι)]. In this sense the Word “became flesh” or “became human” to describe the process of embodiment or to become “enfleshed.”<sup>9</sup>

The language of John’s prologue describes the incarnation of Jesus Christ through two words, a noun and a verb, in verse 1:14: “flesh” [sarx] and “becoming” [ginomai]. John uses two common Greek words to describe something uncommon. The enfleshment of Jesus Christ is uncommon because John calls Christ’s enfleshment as the monogeneos [μονογενοῦς], the one and only born of the Father. Root is correct when he says the “incarnation is only a noun (a word that describes something) because it is first a verb, a word that speaks of an action, and in this case the action of a person.”<sup>10</sup> Root points to Bonhoeffer who says: “Strictly speaking, we should not talk of the incarnation, but of the incarnate one.”<sup>11</sup> The English noun “incarnation” derives from Old French word *incarnatio* which is from the Latin *incarnatus* which is the past participle of the verb ‘to incarnate.’ This means to “enflesh”, “take flesh”, or

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F Torrance (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), IV/4.2, 599.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, IV/3.2, 600-614.

<sup>7</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *The Incarnation and The Church’s Witness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999), 9.

<sup>8</sup> In future research I might look deeper at variations I observed in Ignatius’ wording (in Greek) when he describes the incarnation.

<sup>9</sup> Ross Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh Towards an Incarnational Missiology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 16.

<sup>10</sup> Andrew Root, *The Relational Pastor: Sharing in Christ by Sharing Ourselves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 117.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John W. De Gruchy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 117.

“clothe with flesh”.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the modern verb (incarnate) and noun (incarnation) describe the unique action of God to enflesh Jesus Christ.<sup>13</sup>

The adjectival term “incarnational” is a modern invention. In 1994 Darrel Guder claimed that the term “incarnational” was “apparently a twentieth century neologism.”<sup>14</sup> In 1994 Guder did not benefit from research tools such as Google’s Ngram.<sup>15</sup> This tool confirms Guder’s claim that the term “incarnational” is a modern invention. The Google Ngram search of all books in their domain reveals the first use of the term “incarnational” in 1866 in one isolated book with the next occurrence forty-eight years later in 1914. It appears that the adjectival term “incarnational” picked up frequency in the 1960s. For comparison, the word “incarnation” has a myriad of occurrences in the same database beginning in the year 1502 which essentially the beginning of Google’s database.<sup>16</sup>

We must ask why no English text appears to make an adjective out of the well-established verb and noun related to “becoming flesh” until, essentially, the 1960s. Guder says this “grammatical innovation” is very significant.<sup>17</sup> In order to understand why the term *incarnational* is a recent innovation, a brief reflection on grammar is required as a primer to frame the discussion on incarnational theology.

An adjective denotes the quality or extent of a thing named.<sup>18</sup> An adjective does not stand alone; an adjective exists to describe a thing named. The supplementary role of an adjective creates a challenge with the concept of incarnation. The incarnation is *monogeneous*; in other words, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is unique. When this concept is made adjectival its uniqueness is subjugated in service of another concept. It is this subjugation that presents a challenge to Christian theology and, more specifically,

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<sup>12</sup> Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh Towards an Incarnational Missiology*, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Darrell Guder writes: “To speak of the incarnation is always to speak of Jesus Christ, the Lord, the once-for-all event of God’s saving work in the world and for the world.... It is a noun that summarizes the ‘what’ of the gospel, rooted in the ‘why’ of God’s compassion for creation and purpose to being about its salvation. At the same time, it is a concept that, in a very profound way, defines the ‘how’ of gospel witness. There is a fundamental pattern to God’s self-disclosure throughout all the scriptures.” Guder, *The Incarnation and The Church’s Witness*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Guder, “Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission,” *International Review of Mission* 83, no. 330 (July 1994): 417.

<sup>15</sup> Google Ngram is an online search engine that indicates the origin and frequency of terms and phrases from Google’s databases of written texts that go back to the year 1500. See <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

<sup>16</sup> Google’s Ngram database begins with texts which originate in the year 1500. See <https://books.google.com/ngrams>.

<sup>17</sup> Guder adds that the “adjective ‘incarnational’ cannot be formulated in German, which has led some German theologians to doubt whether the idea is even thinkable (a not unknown tendency of German theology).” Guder, “Incarnation and the Church’s Evangelistic Mission,” 420.

<sup>18</sup> Webster’s dictionary defines an adjective as a “modifier of a noun to denote a quality of the thing named, to indicate its quantity or extent, or to specify a thing as distinct from something else.” Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1998).

Christology. To be more specific, the phrase “incarnational ministry” presents a challenge because the noun “ministry” is served by the adjective “incarnational.” When the incarnation is merely an optional quality of ministry, as if there could be any ministry that stands apart from the incarnation of Jesus Christ, we are left wondering if an internal theological assumption is present whereby a ministry exists apart from the person of Jesus Christ? Is there such thing as a non-incarnational ministry? What is more likely is that conceptions of “incarnational ministry” describe focused efforts to model ministry after the pattern set by Jesus Christ. While it is still troubling that, beginning in the 1960s, people needed to invent a word to recalibrate their models of ministry in the pattern of Jesus, the adjective remains in the vernacular of the church. The rest of this paper will attend to ways in which Christology, specifically the theology of the incarnation, should guide conceptions of the term incarnational, especially the concept of incarnational ministry.<sup>19</sup>

### **Five Models of Incarnational Theology**

This paper proposes five theological models of incarnational theology. The first two models exist to highlight the boundary line between orthodoxy and heterodoxy related to incarnational theology. The remaining three models represent tenable expressions of incarnational theology applicable to humans. Each of these three models, while not being mutually exclusive, express soteriological benefits available through Christ. At the risk of falling into the grammatical trap described above, these models are described as incarnational soteriology not because there is any soteriology available apart from Christ, but because of distinct emphases in each model that relate to Christ. These models do not force the divide that Melancthon introduced when he said, “to know Christ means to know his benefits, and not ...to reflect upon his natures and the modes of his incarnation. For unless you know why Christ put on flesh and was nailed to the cross, what good will it do you to know merely the history about him?”<sup>20</sup> Instead, these models are expressed to recognize a symmetry between knowing the history regarding Christ’s natures and modes with the experience of Christ’s benefits.

The first model of incarnational theology is *incarnational Christology*. This model is essentially Chalcedonian Christology. Christology with the adjective incarnational could appear to be redundant, but the adjective is retained in this paper to establish an incarnational theology which is, first and

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<sup>19</sup> Guder writes: “There is a danger... in making an adjective out of the noun incarnation. This grammatical move can become profoundly reductionistic – and this is frequently happening in the theological discussion today!” Guder, *The Incarnation and The Church’s Witness*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> Phillip Melancthon, “Loci Communes Theologici,” in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Louisville, KY: Westminster Press, 1969), 21–22.

foremost, Chalcedonian. The primary claim of the incarnational Christology model is that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human in a way that is unique and unrepeatable. While Nicaea established that Jesus Christ is Lord, Chalcedon sought to articulate that Jesus Christ includes two natures *in* one Person.<sup>21</sup> Modern theologians have emphasized a Chalcedonian theology “from below” accentuating Christ’s humanity.<sup>22</sup> This movement began with Schleiermacher and continues to this day. Billings wrote that Moltmann and Barth did not approach Christology as one would with math “how to make two ‘natures’ into one ‘person.’ Instead one should look to the incarnate Word to find out who God is.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, modern theology has resourced advocates of incarnational theology in a way which prior theology did not since modern theology has tended to emphasize the human actions of Jesus Christ in the flesh. The most important claim of the incarnational Christology model is that Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ only, is fully God and fully human.

The second model of incarnational theology is *incarnational anthropology*. This model exists to encompass any claims which confuse wrongly the distinction between Creator and creation. This incarnational model is heretical while being deceptively subtle. Further, this model is a modern innovation which has emerged from adjectival use of the verb “incarnate.” While modern, the core of this heretical model is ancient. Incarnational anthropology is heard in the garden being whispered by another created thing: “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:5). Incarnational anthropology revolts against the first commandment (Ex. 20:3) as it attempts to exalt human capacity and ontology. Incarnational anthropology exists in the wilderness in attempts to make stones into bread, weight into weightlessness, and worship of God into worship of Satan (Mt. 4:1-11). While being ancient, incarnational anthropology thrives within the modern North American ethos of individualism which constantly insists that “I can do it. I can do anything I put my mind to.” Even worse, this message is tattooed in the skin and theologies of the masses who have believed the eisegetical prosperity interpretation of Phil. 4:13.

Incarnational anthropology is a tempting model to follow because its modality is right, but its nature is misplaced. Humans are, indeed, meant to flourish in our imitation of Christ, as Marc Cortez claims:

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<sup>21</sup> Bruce L. McCormack, “The Person of Christ,” in *Mapping Modern Theology : A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 152.

<sup>22</sup> Langmead, *The Word Made Flesh Towards an Incarnational Missiology*, 50.

<sup>23</sup> Billings, “Incarnational Ministry and Christology: A Reappropriation of the Way of Lowliness,” 194.

“Jesus is the unique revelation of what it means to be truly human.”<sup>24</sup> However, humans, no matter how much they model and mirror the pattern set by Christ, humans can never become Christ. God can become flesh (this is the incarnation). But, flesh cannot become God (no matter how hard a person attempts to be “incarnational”). Billings articulates this concept and gives an apt example, he writes: “Christ meets humanity in the extreme limits of human experience, but ‘salvation is not in those limits’.” As such, the suffering of the Christian is not redemptive in and of itself; one must always sharply distinguish between the cross of Christ and the cross of the Christian.”<sup>25</sup> When advocates of incarnational ministry instruct ministers to “enter in” to the plight of others, they are making an impossible plea. Humans can come alongside others, be present with others, but humans can never be “in” the situations and experiences of others; attempts to do so are efforts towards idolatry of self. Now that the first two models have drawn a line in the ground to guide concepts of proper and improper incarnational theology, we will move now to articulate further incarnational models which align with a proper Chalcedonian understanding.

The final three models of incarnational theology are all instances of incarnational soteriology. The first instance of this model, and the third model overall, is *incarnational soteriology through the indwelling of Christ*. This model is exemplified in Paul’s words to the Galatians: “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Gal. 2:20) Christ is not *enfleshed* in me, Christ *lives* in me. There is no generation [ginomai] of flesh [sarx] when one lives by faith. Instead, by faith, Christ lives *in* me, Christ lives *in my* flesh.<sup>26</sup> A Trinitarian understanding allows us to appreciate the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in believers in a similar way. Paul writes to the Corinthians: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16) Through the Spirit, God dwells, or “houses” [oikeo] *in* you. Paul’s usage of temple language makes an important point in regard to incarnational theology since the Bible consistently portrays God dwelling in the temple found in Eden, in the Tabernacle, in the Temple, in the person of Jesus Christ, and in (as here) the Spirit-filled believer.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Marc Cortez, *Resourcing Theological Anthropology: A Constructive Account of Humanity in the Light of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 168. Cortez’s account is an excellent example of a proper anthropology grounded in Christology.

<sup>25</sup> Billings, “Incarnational Ministry and Christology: A Reappropriation of the Way of Lowliness,” 196.

<sup>26</sup> Other passages that speak of Christ indwelling in believers are: Jn. 14:20, 17:23, Rom. 8:10, Eph. 3:17-19, Col. 1:27, 1 Jn. 3:24, and Rev. 3:20.

<sup>27</sup> See G. K. Beale and Mitchell Kim, *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

The second model of incarnational soteriology, and the fourth model overall, is *incarnational soteriology through union with Christ*. Union with Christ can mean, in a simple sense, that the merits of Christ's obedience are imputed to the believer, or it can be as far-reaching as an experiential mystical union with Christ reaching its zenith in the Eucharist.<sup>28</sup> Some accounts of union with Christ have stressed Christ's vicarious humanity, birth, baptism, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of behalf of believers<sup>29</sup> at the expense of muting the transformative work of the Spirit.<sup>30</sup> Letham, instead, claims that these two aspects are inseparable.<sup>31</sup> It is through the transformative work of our union with Christ that we will be *like* Christ.<sup>32</sup> It is this *likeness* to Christ because of our *union with Christ* that enables a proper incarnational ministry.<sup>33</sup> Christ's incarnation enables us, through union with Christ, to be *like* Christ in a rightly grounded incarnational ministry. Billings calls this dynamic the "double grace of union with Christ" in which a believer is both made right with God, but also "leads to the discovery of one's new life in the household of God."<sup>34</sup>

A properly understood incarnational soteriology through union with Christ is grounded in the meritorious and transformative work of Christ and not ourselves so that ministers who advocate for incarnational ministry base their identity fully in Christ instead of making Christ a mere appendage of our identity.<sup>35</sup> Billings points out wisely that the doctrine of union with Christ counterbalances the prevalent North American experience among youth who view religion as moralistic therapeutic deism.<sup>36</sup> Youth ministries who advocate for incarnational ministry would be wise to rely upon both the meritorious and transformative work of Christ more than their own meritorious or transformative

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<sup>28</sup> Martin Davie et al., eds., *New Dictionary of Theology: Historical and Systematic*, 2nd ed. (Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 929–32.

<sup>29</sup> For an example of a sustained articulation of this approach see John C. Clark and Marcus Peter Johnson, *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 127–55; See Billings's critique of this approach as well J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 20.

<sup>30</sup> Letham claims that Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge are to blame for driving a wedge between imputation and transformation in the context of union with Christ, making these two aspects detached and isolated. Robert Letham, *Union with Christ: In Scripture, History, and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishers, 2011), 2.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>33</sup> Berkhof suggests a balanced definition, he writes that union with Christ "may be defined as that intimate, vital, and spiritual union between Christ and His people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life and strength, of their blessedness and salvation." In this sense union with Christ denotes not only the union between the believer and Christ's meritorious actions, but also the ongoing strength which is both intimate and vital for the Christian. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh; Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 449.

<sup>34</sup> Billings, *Union with Christ*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–28.

efforts. This is easier said than done. A proper Christology provides the basis by which we learn that, as Clark writes: “The incarnation is a monumental rebuke of our misguided aspirations, for it accomplishes the severe mercy of rendering absurd any notion that rapprochement between God and humanity is accomplished from the side of humanity.”<sup>37</sup> Billings suggests, perhaps more constructively, that “As one united to Christ, we participate in the Spirit’s ongoing work of bearing witness to Christ” and that, “today’s church should replace its talk of ‘incarnational ministry’ with the more biblically faithful and theologically dynamic language of ministry as participation in Christ.”<sup>38</sup> In sum, “Instead of just giving us the abstract ‘pattern’ of incarnation as a model for ministry, God unites us to Jesus Christ.”<sup>39</sup>

The final model of incarnational theology is *incarnational soteriology through theosis* (also called deification or divinization). This model has similarities with the incarnational anthropological model because they both address the ontological capacity of humans. The difference between incarnational soteriology through deification and incarnational anthropology is found in the ontological difference between Creator and creation. It was shown above that when this difference is blurred, we enter into idolatry of self and away from historical Christianity. Human ontology, however, is not entirely distanced from the Creator because humans are made in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). Put simply, theosis is “the claim that believers participate or share in the divine nature as a consequence of salvation.”<sup>40</sup> Irenaeus stated: “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ... did through His transcendent Love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”<sup>41</sup> Athanasius wrote: “For he was incarnate that we might be made god”.<sup>42</sup> While a thorough examination of the term is beyond the scope of this paper, theosis is understood as the process of sharing in the divine nature, or as 2 Pet. 1:4 states, that believers “become partakers in the divine nature.” An essential clarification must be made which is understood as the Palamite distinction between the energies and the essence of this sharing. In theosis one shares God’s energies, or in other words God’s actions and participable

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<sup>37</sup> Clark and Johnson, *The Incarnation of God: The Mystery of the Gospel as the Foundation of Evangelical Theology*, 127.

<sup>38</sup> Billings, *Union with Christ*, 124.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>40</sup> Richard Lints, “Soteriology,” in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly M Kapic and Bruce L McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 285.

<sup>41</sup> Irenaeus, “Against Heresies,” in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 5 (ANF 1:526).

<sup>42</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2011), sec. §54, p. 107.

qualities, while one does not share in God's essence (*ousia*), or in other words, God's inaccessible internal being.<sup>43</sup> Without this distinction the Creator-creature distinction becomes blurred.<sup>44</sup>

The doctrine of theosis in the hands of advocates of incarnation ministry lends itself to some of the most tempting language mistakes within incarnational theology. We must avoid all language of incarnation as a verb of which humans are the subject or object. Humans do not and cannot "incarnate." Neither does God incarnate us (such as missional statements that say "we will incarnate the gospel in our community"). To do so would be to mistake our essence (*our ousia*) with Christ's essence – this would betray the Palamite distinction. Further, we, as humans, already have flesh, we are already *en-fleshed*, we cannot *en-flesh* ourselves any differently than we are already. More positively, however, the model of incarnational soteriology through theosis can help advocates of incarnational ministry to appreciate that the presence of a Christian is the presence of a person in whom the image of God is being restored – this is a reality which makes the Christian distinct from the non-Christian in mission work and also aids the mutual respect and dignity that Christians should have for each other.

#### **A pastoral call for a more careful understanding of "incarnational ministry"**

In light of the preceding definitional and theological work of this paper. Three theses are suggested to guide the appropriate use of incarnation language:

- (1) The noun incarnation applies only to the person of Jesus Christ.
- (2) The verb incarnate applies only to the act of Jesus Christ becoming human.
- (3) The adjective incarnational describes the actions of believers seeking to live Christ-like because they are indwelt, in union with, and made in the image and likeness of Christ.

The purpose of the articulation of these theses is not only theological, the purpose is also practical. Simply put, human efforts to *be* God will always fail. In our failure we will be content to establish personal boundaries that give us freedom to believe and say to others "I cannot do it all." The appropriate use of incarnational language will help us to avoid the guilt that comes when we cannot carry fully the burdens of others (who can be carried by God alone). We will also function in our gifting

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<sup>43</sup> Louth adds another way to make this distinction: "There is no ontological continuity between the image in the mirror and that of which it is the image; so, in the case of the soul reflecting the image of God, this similarity discloses a much deeper dissimilarity at the level of substance." Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition from Plato to Denys* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1981), 80.

<sup>44</sup> The Palamite distinction has been challenged by Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, see: Roger E. Olson, "Deification in Contemporary Theology," *Theology Today* 64, no. 2 (July 1, 2007): 189ff.

when we “stay in our lane” because we believe that the effectiveness of ministry is not dependent upon our human capacity; instead we recognize our finite humanness as a blessing. In this light, Andrew Purves warns us: “Beware of all teachings that suggest it is your job to incarnate Jesus or to stimulate some kind of ostensible religious experience. It is not necessary for you to try to repeat the incarnation within yourself in an attempt to be messianic!”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 57.