

## Incarnational Theology- Revisited

by Whitney Altopp

The theological issue that makes Christianity stand alone within the panoply of religions is the point that God became human. Jesus did not take on the form of a human, as Docetism claimed. Nor did he deny his Divinity, as Arianism argued. He was both fully human and fully Divine. The church Fathers spent a great deal of time articulating this precisely in the First Council of Nicea (325). Nevertheless, conversation on Jesus' fully human and fully Divine nature has continued, as is demonstrated in this article.

After Jesus' resurrection, he returns to his disciples to show them that the resurrection is of his body. Again, it wasn't in metaphor or theory that Jesus was raised from the dead. It was as "his body; ours" to quote John Updike in his poem "Seven Stanzas of Easter."<sup>1</sup> The Gospels drive this point home. In Luke and John, Jesus shows the disciples his hand and his side. He even lets them touch him. And as further evidence, he asks for food. In John's Gospel, Jesus appears to his disciples three times after his resurrection, each time demonstrating that it is his body that is resurrected.

The crucifixion and resurrection would have little to no significance if it weren't for the conviction that Jesus was fully human. It's Jesus' fully human and fully divine nature that challenges everyone he encounters. "How is it that this man can forgive sins?" the Pharisees ask.<sup>2</sup> Jesus' humanity seems evident to the Pharisees. It's his divinity they have a problem with. Martha recognizes Jesus' divinity. "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."<sup>3</sup> And yet, even in her recognition she has a limited understanding. It's Jesus' humanity that teaches us what it means for us to be human. "Follow me," Jesus says time and again. He charges his disciples to go out two by two and perform miracles. They're imbued with the same healing power.<sup>4</sup> And after his resurrection, he breathes on them and implores them to "receive the Holy Spirit." He gives to them Divine authority, "Whatever sins you forgive are forgiven. Whatever sins you retain are retained."<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, they perform miracles in the name of the risen Lord Jesus, as we read about in the Book of Acts.

Incarnational Theology has traditionally spoken only of the fact that God became incarnate in Jesus. Traditionally, Incarnational Theology has debated the extent to which we humans and all of creation is imbued with the divine.

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<sup>1</sup> "Make no mistake: if He rose at all it was as His body;...it was as His flesh: ours." John Updike, "The Seven Stanzas at Easter," 1964. <http://jesuitinstitute.org/Resources/Updike%20Seven%20Stanzas.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Mark 2:7

<sup>3</sup> John 11:27

<sup>4</sup> Luke 10:17

<sup>5</sup> John 20:22-23

It's for good reason that people have moved with hesitation into the promotion of our divinity. And yet, the "reasonableness" of this argument is precisely the cause for the hesitation. The consideration of our divinity is not a reasonable topic; it's a mystical matter. It's in the mysticism, so beautifully stated in the Johannine Community, that we consider what it means to be fully human. It is in entering our humanity, not as a concept, but as a body, that we discover the power of the Risen Jesus working in and through us. If we were to faithfully live in our bodies more than our heads, we might discover the power of Living God working in and through us in ways that we didn't imagine. I dare say that the combination of technology and dominance of white male thinking has produced in us a disregard for our very physicalness. With this combination, Incarnational Theology has become another theology of the head. In contrast, if we let our body do the thinking, we are less likely to fall into heresy; less likely to think more highly of ourselves than we ought.

Our bodies have limits. Our bodies are the ways in which we engage the world. Our bodies are the ways in which people know us...even misunderstand us. Bodies are the ways through which we know one another. God prioritized the body by coming among us. It could be argued that we needed God to become human in order for us to understand what it means to be human.

Washing feet.

Turning the cheek.

Giving a cloak.

Shaking dust off of shoes.

Eating.

Eating with.

Touching.

Talking with.

Sitting with.

Taking up our cross.

Dying.

Loving.<sup>6</sup>

Our bodies engage all of creation. We can't not have a carbon footprint. By our life we affect the lives of others. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

The Body of Christ takes up space on earth. That is a consequence of the Incarnation. Christ came into his own. But at his birth they gave him a manger, for "there was no room for him in the inn." At his death they thrust him out, and his

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<sup>6</sup> I'm indebted to Kiese Laymon for the way I've listed these actions. He inspired me by writing in this way in his book *Heavy: An American Memoir*.

Body hung between earth and heaven on the gallows. But despite all this, the Incarnation does involve a claim to space of its own on earth.<sup>7</sup>

Don't we all take up space on the earth? We consume and we excrete. Moving our bodies in the world makes for more consumption and waste. In this process of consuming and discarding, what are we doing with our bodies? Jesus' commandment was to Love One Another. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."<sup>8</sup> Laying down one's life has to do with the body. Where do we feel the clutch of the ego; the numbness of pain; the desire for comfort; the impetus to satisfy our hunger? All of these are in the body. It is in the body that we know oppression, poverty, lameness, imprisonment. Incarnational Theology is about listening to the body so that the Resurrected Lord can be known within us and thus in the world. It is in witnessing God's work in our bodies that others come to believe.<sup>9</sup>

"Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on this earth but yours," Teresa of Avila said. "Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on the world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which he blesses the world."<sup>10</sup>

The work of Practical Theologians offers some constructive imagery for Incarnational Theology. My own work builds upon the evolution of thought beginning with Don Browning and continuing with Ray Anderson and Amy Jacober.

In Don Browning's book *A Fundamental Practical Theology* (1995), he illustrated his thinking with two circles, one within the other, to highlight how narrative works in our theological development. He referred to the outer ring as the "Outer Envelope"- our lived experiences in narrative form, along with the stories and traditions passed down to us. The "Inner Core" is the theological heart which determines how meaning is made.

Ray Anderson modified Don Browning's model in his book *The Shape of Practical Theology* (2001). He layered the Trinity over Browning's two circles. The Inner Core includes Christ, "through whom all things were made." The Outer Envelope is God the Father, and the dynamic line moving between the Inner Core and beyond the boundary of the Outer Envelope is the Holy Spirit.

Amy Jacober keeps Anderson's model and adds to it in her book *The Adolescent Journey*

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<sup>7</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp 248-249.

<sup>8</sup> John 15:13

<sup>9</sup> There are numerous examples in the scriptures where people believe in Jesus because of what he does in the body. The ultimate example being Martha's words to Jesus in John 11:21, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

<sup>10</sup> These words are attributed to St. Teresa of Avila. "Christ Has No Body," Young Catholics, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://young-catholics.com/136/christ-has-no-body-st-teresa-of-avila/>

(2011). The “Pastoral Cycle” describes an individual’s movement in the Trinity, an infinite loop between the outer and inner rings. She describes it in her own words:

Every experience or narrative takes place in the world in which we live. Whether recognized or not, it is connected ultimately to the encompassing narrative of God. The pastoral cycle allows intentional movement from the initial experience to the action which follows. An experience is a disruption of the normal pattern no matter how slight. Exploration takes place as information is gathered seeking both theological and secular input. Reflection takes seriously what was gathered in the exploration stage, adding critical thinking and tradition as information is considered. Action is a result of the informed decisions and appropriate initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

I like Jacober’s addition of the fourfold process which she calls the Pastoral Cycle: (1) experience, (2) exploration, (3) reflection and (4) action. This process acknowledges how the Living God is alive to us; how “the word of God is living and active.”<sup>12</sup> In Jacober’s work, she recognizes the similar idea already developed by Richard Osmer who called them “four major tasks”: (1) the descriptive-empirical, (2) the interpretive, (3) the normative and (4) the pragmatic.<sup>13</sup>

Let’s take The Annunciation as an example, found in Luke 1:26-38.

To follow Jacober’s Pastoral Cycle we would annotate the story in the following way:

- (1) experience- the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary
- (2) exploration- Mary works through her fear and finally asks, “How can this be?”
- (3) reflection- the Angel Gabriel gives her insight into what God is doing
- (4) action- Mary replies, “Let it be according to your word.”

The Pastoral Cycle is carried out between the Divine and the human.

Osmer’s Four Major Tasks are more theoretical or conceptual. This is how The Annunciation would be accounted for in Osmer’s outline:

- (1) the descriptive-empirical- Mary acknowledges/tells everyone that the Angel Gabriel visited her
- (2) the interpretive- she made conclusions based on this encounter with the Angel Gabriel
- (3) the normative- God does send messengers and now she (Mary) is among those who have received a message

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<sup>11</sup> Amy E. Jacober, *The Adolescent Journey: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Practical Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011) p44.

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 4:12

<sup>13</sup> Richard Robert Osmer, *The Teaching Ministry of Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005) p.xv.

(4) the pragmatic- Mary answered the Angel, "Let it be according to your word."

The Four Major Tasks emphasize the post-experience narrative. Throughout all time, it has been our description of the Divine that we have brought into our conversations. Theology is a direct result of the human experience of the Divine. Countless words and meetings, noble acts and wars have been conducted from the source of our experience of the Divine. We carry these experiences as narratives, fine tuning them in our heads, sparring with the other-- whoever he or she may be-- experience versus experience, narrative versus narrative.

What happens when we let our narrative live in our body? When the narrative moves from a story that we can recount alone in our head into our bodies, we engage the Pastoral Cycle again. The Living God shows up in the experience of relating to one another. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."<sup>14</sup> Yet, even if we're alone, as was the boy Samuel, or Mary, or Saul, it is the community of the faithful that helps illuminate and affirm the sovereignty of the Living God. It is with another one or two people that we begin to better discover how God is engaging God's creation. We begin to discover that God is the subject, always the subject.<sup>15</sup>

The model developed by Anderson is applicable when we're studying the life of Jesus, the man born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth; the One who lived on this earth for 33 years in a particular time and place. However, I suggest a different model to assist us in understanding ourselves within the Divine narrative.

With Jesus' ascension into heaven, taking his place seated at the right hand of God the Father, he becomes part of the outer envelope, alongside the Holy Spirit. The inner core is me- you- all of us- Creation. We are "hidden with Christ in God."<sup>16</sup>

I can imagine hearing the reaction of this proposition for theological understanding. I imagine that it originates somewhere in the center of a person's being, shooting to the person's head and out their mouth, "But we are not divine! This model provides too great a temptation. The temptation will be to think that we're divine." I agree.

The temptation has **always** been to **think** that we're divine. Nothing has saved us from giving in to this temptation. From the very beginning through to this present age, humankind has been tempted to think that we can act without the wisdom of God. This temptation is captured in the

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 18:20

<sup>15</sup> This point is emphasized by Douglas John Hall in his book *The Cross in our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) "This [Christian] community must try to understand and to articulate the presence and the meaning of one who, by definition, defies the community's power to understand and to communicate yet who nevertheless (*nevertheless!*) requires this of his witnesses....But point we must-- while believing and hoping that God, who permits this risky business of theology, will use our strictly relative testimonies to be vehicles of the absolute that only the triune God is." p117-119. <sup>16</sup> Hebrews 3:3

story of the serpent with Adam and Eve in the Garden.<sup>16</sup> To name just a few examples in our present age: we've decided who is human; when humans should live or die; what to do with creation; the "right" reason to destroy what is created. We get in a room and debate these things. We make our conclusions and carry out our actions. It is when our actions meet the created order that we realize the limitedness of our understanding. The Sovereign, Living God, is always the subject. When we remember this, we are humbled. If we don't remember it, our body will remind us eventually. The very real limits of our physical form, the tenderness of creation, the responsiveness of creation, will remind us that we don't exist outside of our bodies. It is our bodies that humble us, reminding us that we are made of the same substance of all of God's creation. "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves."<sup>17</sup>

The model that I propose puts any created one- along with all of creation- at the Inner Core, with the Trinitarian Living God as the Outer Envelope (figure 4). Whether we believe it or not, God is the Alpha and Omega. When we recognize ourselves in the center, with everything being within God, then we begin to explore what it means to be fully human. Jesus was at the center during his time on this earth. How did he relate to the infiniteness of God?

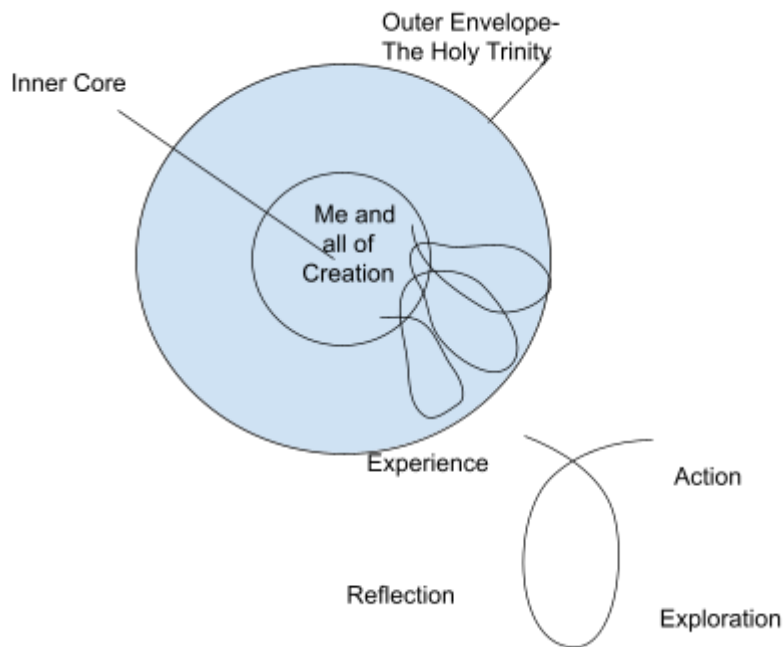


Figure 4. In this illustration, God's creation is centered, which includes me. All of the experience, exploration, reflection and action are held within God. Jacober's fourfold process remains

<sup>16</sup> Genesis 3:1-6

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 3:7

consistent in order. This illustration emphasizes that all is held within God and that the experience of God begins with me.

In his book, *Love Set Free: Meditations on the Passion According to St. John*, Martin L. Smith shares Nicholas Berdyaev's reflection of how Jesus models what it means to be human in *The Divine and the Human*:

True humanness is likeness to God, it is the divine in man...In order to be completely like man, it is necessary to be like God. It is necessary to have the divine image in order to have the human image. Man as we know him is but to a small extent human; he is even inhuman. It is not man who is human but God. It is God who requires of man that he should be human; man on his part makes very little demand for it. In exactly the same way, it is God who demands that man should be free, and not man himself.<sup>18</sup>

Secular humanists, as well as Liberation and Feminist Theologians, have rightfully pointed out that Christianity has historically diminished what happens between humans. Christianity has spent a lot of breath and time articulating what Jesus' death and resurrection means in the grand scheme of time and less on articulating what "God with us" means in all of the "cares and occupations of our life."<sup>19</sup>

The Psalmist sings of our importance:

"...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." (Psalm 8:4-5)

"...you knit me together in my mother's womb." (Psalm 139:13)

"You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;..." (Psalm 23:5)

The Prophets speak of our importance:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;

He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted,

To proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners;

To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort a who mourn;... (Isaiah 61:1-2)

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<sup>18</sup> Martin L. Smith, SSJE, *Love Set Free: Meditations on the Passion According to St. John*, (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1998), p12.

<sup>19</sup> The Book of Common Prayer (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 1979) p100. *A Collect for Guidance* Heavenly Father, in you we live and move and have our being: We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,\* says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 31:32)

For the Christian, it’s always been about relationship- with God and with one another (Jesus’ Summary of the Law).<sup>20</sup> Yet history shows how little regard we have for one another. The list is so long and the illustrations are so many toward this point that it’s overwhelming to attempt to pick one or two for the sake of this article. As the reader, what’s the first thing that comes to your mind about how we’ve used Christian theology to justify the suffering of another? What might happen if we center the suffering in this world within the theology of the Triune God; the Christ who was and is and is to come? How might what we know of Jesus, as part of the Godhead, shape how we treat one another here and now? Rowan Williams, in the preface of his book *Christ is the Heart of Creation* reminds us that we have discussed and shaped our lives informed by the divinity of Christ, however imperfectly our understanding and our practice may be.

If people take seriously doctrines such as the divinity of Christ, it is not primarily because they can treat them as if they were tidy conclusions to an argument, deductions from readily available evidence, but because- however obscure they are grasped, however challenging the detail- they see that the language of doctrine holds together a set of intractably complex questions in a way that offers a coherent context for human living. They make sense, not first as an explanation of things but as a credible environment for action and imagination, a credible means for connecting narratives, practices, codes of behaviour; they offer a world to live in.<sup>21</sup>

How might we allow the humanity of Christ to inform our lives? We seem hesitant at best, and paralyzed at worst, by our awareness of our imperfect understanding and practice as it relates to Jesus’ humanity. Our haphazard and occasional refusal to engage the humanity of Christ has only exacerbated the suffering in the world. To not center ourselves in the “credible environment” of the doctrine of the Trinity means, more often than not, that we abandon the Trinity in our lives. We act as if we can stand outside of God. The paradox is that to center ourselves within the doctrine of the Trinity actually occasions a de-centering of individual salvation. To center ourselves within the doctrine of the Trinity draws us more deeply in relationship with all that God encompasses. Whereas we might begin our theological ruminations believing ourselves to be alone in the center of the circle, the Triune God awakens us to all that is in the center with us. It’s through God’s sovereignty that we are brought into the awareness of our interconnectedness with all of God’s creation. God is the subject in our faith story, which is our very lives. God always has been.

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 22:34-40

<sup>21</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ is the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018) p xi.