



First Focus

On Incarnation

Incarnation means embodiment or enfleshment. Christianity only works in real life when it completely affirms that Jesus is 100% man and 100% God.

The letters of John were written to a faction that upheld his divinity, but denounced His humanity. **Imagine why it would be hard to believe that Jesus was fully man.** Throughout the New Testament and early church history more times than not the problem was not that people had difficulty with His divinity, but His humanity. Most of the conflicts in the first 700 years of church history are centered around the human nature of Christ. Hebrews 2:17 says that Christ had to become completely like us to truly function as a priest for us. Without embracing incarnation, we lose any type of authenticity.

Incarnation is a union of the spiritual and physical. If we become disconnected in our hearts with Christ's humanity, then our faith becomes simply a set of impersonal beliefs that does not transform our lives in the manner a true disciple needs. John's gospel has been known to be the most explicit in showing Christ's divinity, but notice how John opens the book with "The Word became flesh." (John 1:14). In fact, the first chapter of John mirrors Genesis 1 to the point of seeing that life, light, and the world was created by Christ, viewing the creation as an incarnation. John uses different metaphors of Jesus to emphasize life, whether it is being "born again" or "living water." To John, glory of God is only seen in the physical life of Christ.

Incarnation means embodiment of God not only as an event but also in principle. Incarnation means that the spiritual world is revealed in the physical world. Incarnation means that our physical world must engage with the spiritual world. At the same time the physical world is not inferior to the spiritual. Because the physical world is revealing the spiritual realities.

Incarnation shows that faith or religion is not something we do with our better moments, but all of our moments. The principle of incarnation is that since we follow Christ, we follow him incarnate. Our lives should reveal the spiritual realities as we engage with the physical world. Do you see that following Christ is not causal interest or engagement, but complete surrender to be the body of Christ?

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On Unity

Unity comes when we truly embrace the **other-oriented nature** and complete inclusive nature of the kingdom of God. Jesus preached to love your enemy and Paul proclaimed that we wage war not against flesh and blood but against evil spiritual powers.

The unity that the gospel creates is a key sign **in God's authentic work.** Gospel of Christ takes many ideas to a higher level than what we naturally expect. Think love, forgiveness, humility, and sacrifice. All of these themes take on a richer meaning once they are in the context of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. They really jump out of the narrative when we are walking through the story of the Bible. So many of these idealistic themes could overload our attention and prevent us from processing each one in a rich fashion. Notice how each gospel focuses on different idealistic themes as they construct their gospel narrative. This is a reason why the New Testament includes four accounts of the gospel.

Unity is definitely transformed by the good news of Jesus. What I mean by unity is that the gospel breaks down barriers and obstacles of the world to join together people in such a diverse manner that the unity must be divine. The racial and social-economical boundaries were just as stark and polarizing in the 1st century as today. But this did not prevent the gospel from being good news for the poor, the Gentile, and the slave.

We all have blind spots. But the love described by Jesus, however, shines so bright, and so high, that when we participate in such a love those blind spots stop being divisive from our viewpoint. Diversity without love lacks beauty. **But when diversity is created by Love then its beauty shines past any divisiveness.**

On The Lord's Supper

When we partake of the Lord's supper, an extremely special portrait of our faith is revealed. The Lord's Supper and baptism are what we consider to be the two ordinances of the Church. What we mean by ordinances is that both are acts of worship in which we share an identity as a gathered group of Christ-followers.

As growing Christ-followers, the Lord's Supper's role is **to create a picture of our constant spiritual participation in the work of God.** What are we participating in? My prayer is that you begin to see it more than a metaphor for the forgiveness of sins also the place of universal call and opportunity for the participation of the life of Christ.

A major part of communion is remembrance of the sacrifice Jesus paid for you and me. Put the Lord's Supper in the context of **the place where cosmic problems are decisively dealt with.** Let's all imagine places where problems are dealt with. Think about these phrases. "Let's take this outside." "We will do our talking on the field." Those phrases give context to two sides addressing a conflict. Notice each has a designated place for a desired finality. The Lord's Supper is a place to view how the cosmic conflict was resolved and **a place to have a finality for the favor of God upon humanity.**

Some cultures hold a special view for a place where decisiveness takes place. In rural communities, the front porch

is often viewed as place where wrong and right meet and are solved. In our sitcom TV shows, the edge of the bed is where the father and child have an intimate moment and talk. These are icons to where reconciliation occurs. Throughout history, empires and nations have found the battlefield to be a place of justification of conflict. **The Lord's Supper is the Kingdom of God's alternative to all of those places.** The Lord's Supper is the gospel alternative for the best place on Earth.

It is the place where cosmic problems are solved and it's so starkly different than the world's battlefield. It is essential to understand the collective justice element of Lord's Supper portrait. He died to reconcile my sins and yours, and to bring justice to the systems of evil that oppress the weak. As a gathered Church, we are hoping for the divine deliverance of all of humanity's spiritual cancer. Communion doesn't include the idea, *"I will take my salvation and the rest of the world can do what it wants."* We are completely other-oriented when we follow Christ. We must look forward to the day of the Lord where justice,

healing and renewal occur throughout the world. This will happen through Jesus' good news. This is good news where Christ takes center stage, offering all of himself to everyone in the fashion of love and forgiveness! The Lord's Supper is the ultimate place to understand the cross. A banquet table of the exalted one, where Christ personally removes the shame of coming to the Father. Put the Lord's supper in the context of the Passion of the Last Supper and connect it to context of the great banquet of Luke 14:15. The Lord's Supper begins with blessings and not shame. That in itself is life-changing. Even Judas was given the great blessing of participation of the Last Supper.

Agape Love conquers evil at the banquet table not on the battlefield. We are able to participate in His humility as well as His exaltation. To do this, we have to connect the cross with God's love for people. To see the great work that has been done for us through the lens of the prodigal son's father. Connect your heart to that great banquet as well when you participate in the wine and bread of the Lord's Supper.

On Prayer

Prayer that listens for God and is comfortable in silence is some of the most intimate prayer we can experience. When we approach God and don't demand timeframes and understanding, **God's presence becomes enough in and of itself.**

You may have heard the saying that *"when we are truly reading the scriptures, the scriptures are reading us."* This is a trustworthy phrase. We can also say that when we are truly praying to God, God is revealing not only who He is but also who we are. Often times we are focused on learning about who God is to the detriment of learning who we are. **Examine your prayer life. How are you praying for your own discovery?**

This is not a prayer request to find your spiritual gifts, but to find your spiritual identity. As you find your spiritual identity, the Spirit will reveal masks **where we place our efforts into finding our identity in other things besides Him.**

In order to know and love God as He is, we must have God dwelling in us in a new way. The moment where God's presence is enough in and of itself is often the moment where we lay down the masks we use. We all have egos, masks and disguises that we use to cover ourselves. Christ needs to remove these masks in a loving, compassionate and intimate manner in the presence of God.

In God's presence alone will we find who we truly are, and it is only

God that can truly grab our mask to unveil what He has created. We have to be still. If we don't understand that God's hand, thought and beauty is merciful, we will pull back and not allow Christ to remove the mask.

When we are truly seeking to know ourselves, we begin to truly know God throughout the process. Knowing how God interacts with you and your deepest self is one of the most substantial results of prayer. We have to make prayer a pattern of transformation and not just transaction. Prayer is how God realigns reality inside of us, the reality of His nature and the reality of our identity.



On Kenosis

Our pride often makes life all about achievement and attainment.

As long as our ego acts as our primary guide, religion becomes a worthiness contest in which everybody loses or gives up.

Many, if not most people, never even try the spiritual journey when they quickly see that they can't live up to today's culturally created performance principles. If our spiritual journey is not any different than worldly pursuits, why would they even need it? Rather than lose, they do not try at all. However, the way of Jesus is marked by something distinctive. It is the form of a servant. This way embraces meekness and considers others more important than themselves. Humility has been mysteriously described as the **"emptying of one's self."**

Kenosis is a transliterated greek word meaning **"emptying of one's self"** It is only used once in scripture, Philippians 2:7. The word sits right in the middle of the popular passage,

Philippians 2:6-12, which is often called **"the Christ Hymn."** **Kenosis** is used to give understanding and context to the type of humility Jesus embraced.

It has thus been **a starting point for spiritual formation** for literally thousands of years. The gospels consistently show that the call of Christ was to **"follow him."** The simplicity of the command gives it a profound nature but it can also make it difficult to process. You may ask, **"Follow you where, Jesus?"** Of course faith comes into play, but there is also the issue of the style of following. The scriptural answer to the **"follow Christ where"** question is found in the Christ Hymn and the **kenosis** of Philippians 2. We follow him to the cross (Luke 9:23).

The way of Jesus is the way of forming oneself into a servant (John 12:26). To do this, **it takes an awareness and realignment to be other-**

oriented. This type of humility takes a special awareness of one's own ambition, conceit, interests, and what we consider significant. **Kenosis** is owning those parts of ourself and removing them from our mind and heart to the point of emptiness. This is required to be obedient and committed. **Kenosis** is not the grasping for more things but being willing to remain empty, null, or even ineffective for the service to the master.

To empty ourselves as Christ did is the **key connection between living according to the world and being filled with the Spirit.** John the Baptist first prepared the way by becoming less so that Jesus may be great. The servant honors the master. It is continual. It is mysterious. But know the hope of our faith is revealed in our shared resurrection and exaltation with Christ as in Philippians 2:9-11.

On Escaping Earth

The Kingdom of God is here and also not yet. This implies a great work involving the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. This mystery is our treasure and spiritual reality. One thing that we may need to hear is that the Kingdom of God being here and now, means that today has great value. This value means more than the old proverb, **"don't be too heavenly minded, for earthy good."** It means that a renewal of God's design is in the process of completion and you have this day to participate in its construction.

Earth and today have a great value from a biblical perspective. It is important to remember that God is first revealed to us as the Creator of the earth. Our responsibilities given

by God are as caretakers and followed by the commandment to be fruitful here. These commands have not ceased to be in effect. The spiritual life is not an escape of the physical — more a renewal of its beauty and purpose.

May our attitude and theology be shaped by the Lord's Prayer. **Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on Earth as it is in heaven.** If we allow our theology and heart's desires to push us towards desiring an escape from Earth, how can we even truly mean the prayer Jesus taught us to pray? **'Thy kingdom come'** is not a request for the Day of the Lord, it is request to give today the opportunities to further God's reign

on Earth here and now. Each new day given to us shows that **God's will** is for us to pursue and engage with renewal of Earth into God's design. In a sense, we are to live as if earth is heaven. **How can we do this if we only desire to escape Earth?**

Jesus then teaches us to pray, **give us this day our daily bread.** This reflects much of Jesus' teaching on being anxious for tomorrow. To embrace our daily bread is to be content with what God has given us. We will not want to escape Earth if we don't want to escape today. **Today itself doesn't simply contain gifts, it is a gift.** A healthy theology will treasure the opportunity to participate in today's expansion of the Kingdom of God.



Conversation Starters

On Incarnation

1. How does the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ challenge our abilities to fully understand all that God has done in the incarnation of Jesus?
2. What have been some helpful tools and resources for you in getting your head around the concept?
3. Jesus' obedience was not automatic. It was not easy for him to resist temptation and to submit to the will of the Father. How does this understanding of Jesus help us in our fight to obey the commands of God?

On The Lord's Supper

1. What was the most meaningful Lord's Supper you ever participated in? What made it so special?
2. Meals in the ancient world were not just opportunities to conduct business or catch up with old friends. To eat with someone was to express solidarity, friendship and support. In light of this, what are we declaring by participating in the Lord's Supper?
3. Why does Jesus say in John 6:48-63 that we should eat His flesh and drink His blood?

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, *but emptied himself*, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

Philippians 2:5-7

On Kenosis

1. In what ways did Jesus take on the nature of a servant? What are the characteristics of being a servant?
2. Does having the attitude of Christ revolve around our ability to choose to let go of what is rightfully ours?
3. What might happen if Christians stopped demanding their rights and started obeying God's will not matter what? What might happen if we chose to have the attitude of Christ in all of our relationships?
4. Read Phil. 2:9-11. What was God's response to Jesus' humility and obedience?

On Unity

1. Do you place an essential emphasis on unity as one would faith or forgiveness?
2. Do you pray for unity as you would anything else?
3. If unity was removed from your understanding of the gospel would it still be the gospel?

On Prayer

1. How can we make our small group a place where people are able to best flourish and mature in the faith?
2. Why do we grow when we are united to other believers?
3. What role does prayer have in this effort?

On Escaping Earth

1. Rate yourself on a scale of 1-5:

a) How well do you live free of the past?

- [1] being you live in bondage or an unrealistic preoccupation with the past. That could be pain, shame, memories,
[5] being you have a healthy and healed and realistic perspective of the past.

b) How well do you live in the present?

- [1] being you constantly feel ill-at-ease with the present, are unsatisfied, feel empty, or are pursuing temporal things.
[5] being, you constantly find the presence of God in your present situations, and are living fully and taking advantage of the moments that you have right now.