



# J E S U S ' I N C A R N A T I O N : A REASON FOR ME TO CROSS THE STREET

By Tom Mast

***“We are to be to others what Christ has become for us.”***

***- George Macleod, Only One Way Left***

As Jesus neared the end of His life on earth, concluding His Incarnation, he prayed for the followers that He would be leaving behind. This prayer, recorded in the Gospel of John, is startling in its equation of our commission with that of Jesus Himself.

### **The Incarnation and our incarnation**

We are familiar with the idea of the Incarnation – God becoming human in order to fully display His love for us. It is the defining event of God’s relationship with us and it is what we’re celebrating during this season. But in John 17, in one of His final recorded prayers, Jesus clearly explained that His followers are to continue the incarnation of God’s presence in the world. “They [my followers] are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one... *As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world*” (14-15,18 emphasis mine).

Like Jesus, those of us who follow Him are no longer “of the world.” But we have been sent into the world—as Jesus was—in order to demonstrate and testify to God’s love for the world. God’s witness on earth did not end with the ascension of Jesus. It continues through the lives of His followers. That witness, however, is only effective if we follow the example

of Jesus who, missiologist Gailyn Van Rheenen says, “became *like* humanity in order to communicate with humanity. By becoming human, Jesus Christ became the presence of God among his people and the supreme example of how Christians relate to the world.”<sup>1</sup>

### **Born again—out of sin but into the world**

Jesus once told someone who was interested in following him that a person must be “born again” if they are to participate in the kingdom of God (John 3). This new birth is usually thought of in terms of entrance into God’s spiritual family, receiving a new life in Christ because of His death and resurrection. But it is significant that in this process of rebirth we are not removed from the world in which we had been living. Instead, through this second birth, we are delivered back into the world as newly-commissioned representatives of Christ. We become the incarnated message of God.

It is incomplete to view our new birth only as the event that spiritually separates us from “the world” and its sinful, corrupted state. This second birth does represent a break from sin, but it does not remove us from the world. Rather, through it we become the physical presence that demonstrates to the world the truth and power of God’s word. Jesus was the Word who became flesh (John 1:14). We are the flesh, who through the mystery of God’s grace, become His word. God’s message, Paul says, is written on our hearts, we are “letters from Christ,” sent to the world (2 Cor. 3:3).

### **Missiological methods aren’t just for missionaries**

Much is written in missiological circles about the need for “incarnational ministry” on the part of missionaries who are taking the gospel across cultural boundaries. They are urged to focus on learning the new culture, identifying its

*“Incarnated or isolated? Several churches dot the “skyline” of Mechanicsburg, Ohio. But is the gospel being carried out of their doors and into the surrounding homes?”*





God’s kingdom should mean to them? If we take our assignment as incarnated messengers of God’s love seriously, we can’t keep ourselves so far removed from the day-to-day lives of the people around us that they feel no connection between our lives and theirs.

Christian anthropologist Paul G. Hiebert writes about the importance of cross-cultural missionaries identifying with their host culture in their lifestyles and their roles. He concludes, however, that the most important identification must take place in the attitudes of the missionaries. “Ultimately identification does not take place just because we live like the host people or even if we become part of their social structures. It begins with our attitudes toward them...if we have a sense of distance and superiority, they will soon know it.”<sup>2</sup> This is as true for Christians in America as it is for missionaries in the most remote or difficult cross-cultural setting. If we project a “sense of distance and superiority” we are not faithfully living as incarnated messengers of God and our witness will be severely hampered.

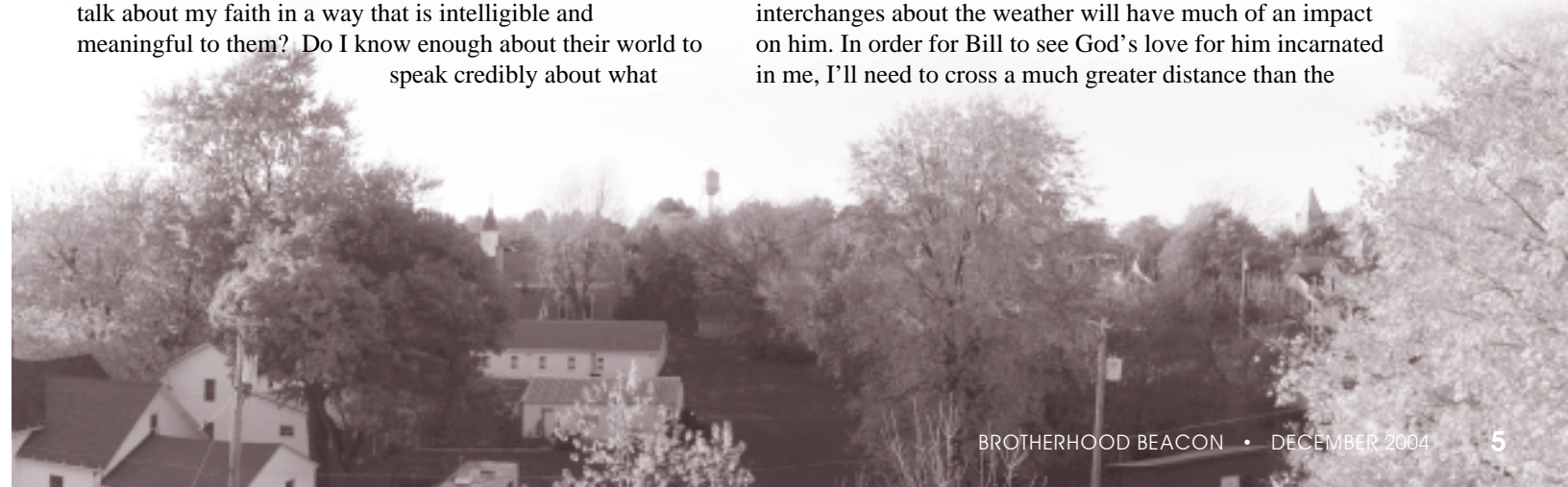
### **My neighbor: 100 feet and a world away**

I live across the street from Bill. Although we live in such close proximity and even though we’ve had a few casual conversations, I’d have to admit that I’ve not really made an effort to incarnate myself into his world. And Bill’s world is significantly different from my world – even though we’re only separated by the width of a street. I know where he works and what kind of car he drives, but I don’t know about the parts of his world that really matter. What is important to him? What does he hope to accomplish? What does he feel is missing? What questions does he wish someone would answer? What is his conception of God? I don’t know the answers to these questions – and he knows equally little about me. Bill may know that I’m a Christian – but I doubt that this knowledge has really made an impact on his life. Of course if he happens to glance out his window at the right time on a Sunday morning he’ll see my family dressed up and leaving for church – but so far he hasn’t run outside and asked if he could come along.

My witness to Bill will almost certainly continue to be marginal and weak unless I make an effort to enter more meaningfully into his world. To do that I’ll need to join him and his overflowing ashtray on his front porch where he likes to sit. Because unless he can see and hear me in his world (not just in my world across the street) I doubt that our brief interchanges about the weather will have much of an impact on him. In order for Bill to see God’s love for him incarnated in me, I’ll need to cross a much greater distance than the

values and underlying assumptions about life. They spend months and years learning how to interact in a sensitive and credible way with those they are trying to reach. They are also willing to make adjustments to their lifestyles in many areas that may seem purely trivial. Workers in Turkey learn to eat sitting on the floor and they try to acquire a taste for liver kebabs. Missionaries in Latin America learn when and how to greet with a kiss and become soccer fans as a way of connecting with the local culture. Language, dress, customs and many other aspects of life are carefully studied and adopted—all with the goal of being able to present the gospel in a way that will make sense in that specific cultural context. Although these issues may be more pronounced in cross-cultural settings, the same basic principles apply to all of us who are living as Christians in the midst of our specific secular cultures. We also need to make conscious decisions to learn more about those who inhabit the society around us.

My neighbors speak and understand English, but do I talk about my faith in a way that is intelligible and meaningful to them? Do I know enough about their world to speak credibly about what





one hundred feet that separate our houses. I must follow the example of Jesus and truly enter into Bill's world. I might not be comfortable there. I might not like the secondhand smoke. But unless I take these steps, my faith will never be something that he can comprehend or appreciate and I will be ill-equipped to convince him that God is a reality he needs to consider.

### A call to daily incarnation

In the incarnation, we see the ultimate act of identification and it is this example that we're called to emulate in our relationships with the world around us. In a challenge again written to prospective missionaries, but applicable to all Christians, Van Rheezen declares "The message of God must become incarnate in us. We must become God's message in human flesh dwelling among people...Like Christ, the living Message in flesh, we must not separate ourselves from people by means of impersonal programs and institutions. As ambassadors of Christ, we must become the Word in flesh dwelling in the midst of people."<sup>3</sup> No matter how well-designed our church programs are, no matter how fervently we believe in the importance of being a witness, if we are not willing to purposefully identify with the non-Christians around us in order to demonstrate through our lives the message of God's love and salvation, we've failed to fully live up to our commission—and the example that Jesus set throughout His life.

Because we are not "of this world" it is easy to distance ourselves from those who are of the world. After all, our basic motivations, goals, and values have (or should have) changed with our new birth. It requires discipline and humility to follow the example of Jesus who "made himself nothing, taking on the very nature of a servant" (Phil. 2:7). But even if it doesn't come naturally to us, our status as God's messengers, His instruments for demonstrating His kingdom and His life on this earth, compels us to daily enter into the world for that purpose.

As we celebrate the Incarnation during this Christmas season and as we praise God for His

mercy and love demonstrated in that event, let's remember that we too have been re-born into this world as God's representatives. We are the ongoing incarnation of God's love for this world and the only way the message will be meaningful is if we are willing to follow Jesus' example. Like Him, let's humble ourselves. Like Him, let's be willing to associate with "sinners." Like Him, let's allow ourselves to be whole-heartedly sent into the world. **BB**

<sup>1</sup>Van Rheezen, Gailyn. *Missions: Biblical Foundations & Contemporary Strategies*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996. p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Hiebert, Paul G. *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985. p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Van Rheezen, p. 73

*Tom is the communications director for Rosedale Mennonite Missions and an assistant pastor at London Christian Fellowship. He and his wife, Candice (Rhodes), have one daughter and another child on the way. They live in Mechanicsburg, Ohio. (tom@rmmoffice.org)*

