DML814: Effective Ministry in Today's Globalized Environment (NA)

LEARNING EXPERIENCE 2
Incarnation, Excarnation and Societal Implications to Doing Church

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World View Shifts and their Impact

Incarnation is the essence of the Christian message. As I began reading Michael Frost's book, "Incarnate the Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement," I stopped reading after a few pages and took my study Bible and reviewed some of the key passages concerning the miracle of the incarnation. I also reviewed the section on the deity of Christ in Grudem's Systematic Theology. As I sat in the front row of the chapel where we are currently living and the warmth of the sunlight shining on me, I prayed that in a fresh new way I would be awed by the incarnation. This miracle does not stop there, for we are called the body of Christ and Frost says, "more than ever, it seems, such a call to incarnation living needs to be heeded."[1]

As the world, especially in the West, is de-fleshing the human experience with individualism, hyperdualism and objectification, this has resulted in cultural fragmentation. In the church, we have to have a Christocentric approach to life and ministry. We are as Frost says, "finding ourselves drifting toward excarnation—the deflection of our faith."[2] This gap between profession and practice is a key focus of the book. This dualism causes us to drift away from an incarnational approach to ministry. We are tied to our electronic devices that receive our focus rather than the very people who may be in the room with us. It's like a "drift towards rootlessness and disengagement."[3] Unfortunately, the church is swirling around the same drain. Where are we going? Frost contends that, "in all, I suggest Christianity has become an out-of-body-experience – personalized, privatized, customized – and it is being this because of the talk by clergy increasingly disconnected from an incarnational expression of faith."[4] This hyperdualism teaches a separation of life into two categories, "the sacred and the profane, or the spiritual and the physical."[5]

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[1] Frost, Michael. *Incarnate the Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement*. Inver Varsity Press, Downers Grove IL. USA, 2014. 12

[2] Frost. 15

[3] Frost. 30

[4] Frost. 31

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Therefore, this "Dualism is the philosophical foundation of excarnation."[6] Thus, this excarnation leads to disengagement. This detachment between body and the mind/spirit/soul is most evident in the area of moral ambiguity in our time. The separation also has an effect upon the church, Consequently, for many, we are not rooted in incarnation, but focused on the escape. Escape from the suffering in this world, escape to heaven and, tragically, escape from one another. As our faith is viewed as something privatized, internalized and conceptual, we find ourselves neighborless. We are commanded to "love our neighbor as ourselves," but often we have never gotten beyond the self-centered love affair, even as Christians. Objectification causes us to view so much in an impersonal and distant way. We measure success by counting souls and prioritizing budgets.

Chapter five begins with a quote from Brennan Manning that says, "if you want to know what a person believes, watch what they do."[7] We can give mental ascent to all kinds of truths, but in fact we need to go beyond knowing and be committed to new depths of doing and being. Frost argues that we are adopting an increasingly excarnate approach to faith. Our faith is to be more than just in our imaginations. We need to have a more holistic view of human persons. We need to do more than teaching—we need to see the transformation of the whole person.

This transformation can only come about if we draw near to the Master and learn discipleship, not just in our heads, but also in our *fingertips.* As Frost says, "Like Jesus, incarnational leaders model it, live it, breathe it and invite others to copy them."[8] "We can no longer have disembodied approaches to doing theology."

Missional Hermeneutic and Practice

The Lord Jesus was God incarnate. The danger is the church, especially in the West, could be described as being excarnate. We are to be the hands and feet of Christ, to one another, to our neighbors

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[6] Frost 34

[7] Frost 41

[8] Frost 69

Frost 90

and to the ends of the earth and the age. Rather than mimicking the commercialism of our day that results in the church being a religious service vendor, we need to have a healthy missional focus. A healthy missional/apostolic focus is committed to joining God's activity beyond the church walls and the limitations of selfishness. With this, Frost offers us a new hope that the church can fulfill its vocation.

Frost's focus has been primarily on the West. There is no doubt that this disengagement is more pronounced in the West. This past April we were evacuated from Cameroon in Central Africa in the midst of both a pandemic and war. In our six years there, we have been on the cultural roller coaster on a few occasions. There have been numerous times in the midst of a conflict that we have said to one another, "people are people are people." Human nature, the sin nature that express selfishness and pride, is universal. We need to guard against assumptions that are based on our own culture and experience. Have we exported our attitude and disengagement to the mission field? My short answer is—yes. When I look at Frost's table 13.1 page 182, traits of healthy and unhealthy religions, I see my North American experience, but I also see the Cameroonian's experience as well. Yes, there are a number of contextual and cultural differences; but in the end, I see many similarities. These traits are seeds that have been planted and I'm concerned that in time they too will experience the chronic issues of what we are now facing in the West. Frost asks the question, "What does healthy religion look like?" To answer this, he refers to Ann Morisy, who uses Ron Sebring's description with four statements:[9]

- Healthy religion does not indoctrinate, but teaches people to think for themselves.
- Healthy religion invites us to be humble about what we believe and what we know.
- Healthy religion does not invest in negativity; it does not major on what it is against, but rather on what it is for.
- Healthy beliefs stay in tune with reality, never filling in gaps for what we do not know.

As I consider each of these four statements, I recognize in my own life and ministry that I have in recent years consciously moved away from unhealthy characteristics to healthier attitudes as defined. A

[9] Frost 185

few months after arriving in Bamenda, North-West Province of Cameroon, to teach at Full Gospel Bible Institute and Seminary, I recognized that many of the traits of unhealthy religion is embedded in their faith, as well. I see two sources to their unhealthy attitudes, what they were taught by missionaries and the inclinations of their culture. In the Cameroonian church no matter what denomination, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian, Baptist or Pentecostal, they are pastor-centered churches. A joke told by many Cameroonians is that if their house catches on fire, they will call their pastor first and as ask what they should do! The pastors tend to encourage this pastor dependence by the sheep. When teaching on discipleship, I encourage them to develop "self-feeding" disciples. Often a high-power distance relationship between sheep and shepherd is the norm. These leaders, that call themselves prophets, are led by a group called the Major Prophets. The Major Prophets are led by the "Major One." They are followed in order of importance by apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers. All of what I have described here is not tolerated within Full Gospel Mission, our Cameroonian partner. Yet some of our Bible school students are intoxicated with the thought of having such control over large numbers of people. This is, of course, clearly a form of objectification.

Finally, Frost encourages us "to move from unhealthy, excarnate religion to the approach we see in the example of Jesus: a healthy, life-giving, dynamic commitment to serve and glorify God and all we do."[10] We don't want to have a fleeting tourist mentality, but have the attitude of the pilgrim on a journey to see in greater and greater ways the miracle of incarnation of God in Christ and Christ in us. How will these things be accomplished in us or in the church? We need a fresh revelation of God incarnate in Christ for our salvation and Christ incarnate in us to effectively engage the world around us even in an age of disengagement.

Appendix

Implications of excarnations to personal wholeness and the missional practice of the church

[10] Frost 188

- Our view of people is a whole person not just a “soul” to be saved or “body” to affect our attendance numbers.
- Being aware of the dangers of assuming the crowd are truly following Christ.
- Not losing the importance of personal one-on-one relationships in the midst of the pandemic. The epidemic of loneliness was already extensive before the pandemic.
- Consciously guarding against the dangers of the conversion/decision/crisis only mentality, that focuses on the crisis rather than step by step transformation.
- In the Cameroonian context, most pastors referred to the believers that are a part of their local church as “my Christians.” On occasion when I questioned this expression, it is usually met with quick acknowledgment that, in fact, they are Christs and not theirs.
- Again in the Cameroonian context, I love retelling the story of the drama presented at one of our graduations. The drama was of a brief reenactment of a church service where the pastor prayed and dismissed the congregation. As the congregation exited, the pastor’s wife and children rushed to the platform at the front of the church to join their pastor/husband/dad. They informed him that they would like to sleep on mattresses on the floor. The wife would cook behind the church in the African kitchen; and therefore, they would not have to leave the church building. The pastor reacted by demanding that they go to their home. The wife and children immediately responded that they preferred the loving, patient godly man of the pulpit rather than impatient, angry and demanding man in the house. The danger is for ministry to become more of a show, or act, than a reality in the home.
- Finally, carefully evaluating the mission of the church in light of table 13.1 comparing the traits of healthy and unhealthy religion. (Frost, page 182)

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