

THE MODEL OF THE INCARNATION

Ben Janssen | **Philippians 2:1-5** | January 5, 2020

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

For the past five weeks, we've been studying the incarnation of the Son of God from this passage in Philippians 2. We've concentrated on verses 6-11, which many see as a 1st century hymn about the life of Christ, taking us from his pre-incarnate existence into his incarnate life, his substitutionary death, and his vindication through bodily resurrection, ascension, and universal reign.

Now the title of this sermon series has been, "*Servant Form: Modeling Our Lives on the Incarnate Son of God.*" We've been aiming at the verses before us today, verses 1-5, and we can see here that the reason Paul uses this Christ-hymn is to inspire a response from his audience because of it. In some way the incarnation of the Son of God is to be a model that motivates Christian living. Because Jesus accomplished his mission as a real human being, he is a model for our lives. But not the way you might think. You see, Jesus is not so much a model to be copied as a model to which we are being conformed, and this is the kind of model that transforms not only our relationship with God but also our relationship with one another.

This morning let's consider that through the model of the incarnation, you and I together have been made participants in Christ, beneficiaries of Christ, and witnesses to Christ.

PARTICIPANTS IN CHRIST

First, the incarnation of the Son of God becomes a model for Christian living not by telling us to act like Jesus but rather by telling us to participate in Jesus. This is the key distinction in Christian ethics, but it is so easily missed and often misunderstood.

The Mind of Christ

Here in Philippians 2, there's an emphasis on the importance of Christians having unity of mind. In verse 2 we see this emphasis at the beginning and end of the verse. "Complete my joy by being of the same *mind*, having the same love, being in full accord and of one *mind*." The key to this unity is not to think what your Christian brother or sister thinks or to get them to think the way you think. It's not even to come up with some compromise in our thinking. It is, rather, for us all to have the mind of Christ. Verse 5 says it explicitly, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus." This verse then leads to the Christ-hymn in verses 6-11.

But here's where the teaching is often misunderstood. The verse is not saying that we should think the way Christ thinks. That is, it is not simply telling us to imitate Christ's way of thinking. Most English translations read that way. The NASB, for example, says, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus."

But the Greek reads, “Think this among yourselves, which also in Christ Jesus.” The verb has to be supplied in the second part of the verse in translation. And with no verb stated, it is the previous verb that should be supplied. The kind of mindset we are to have with one another in the church is the kind of mindset we have in Christ. What the ESV is saying is that the way we should think about each other ought to match the way we think now that we are in Christ.

Having just come out of Christmas, what do we think about the eternal Son of God who became man? What do we believe about his incarnation? Do we believe that by becoming human like us he has become joined to us? Do we believe that by his obedience we are credited with obedience? Do we believe that his vindication in resurrection makes him the indisputable “Lord” to whom we kneel and bow?

Has our mind changed at all because of the incarnation of the Son of God? Do we see the world differently than we did before?

The Mission of Christ

Surely being a Christian means that we see the world in a very different way because of our belief in Christ. I heard someone this week say she was a Christian, but not particularly religious. But to be a Christian is to not only believe in Jesus but to participate in Jesus. To follow Jesus. Surely being a Christian means that our minds have been changed, that we think differently about everything now that we believe that Jesus is the Savior of the world.

The central concern of this passage is that Christians will get along with one another, that they will have the same mind. The passage begins at Philippians 1:27, where Paul expresses his hope that the believers in Philippi will stand “firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.” What a great thing to find in a local church. Oh that this would be true of us at Crosstown! To live a life “worthy of the gospel of Christ” is to be all in with your brothers and sisters, not just cheering on a few who are striving “for the faith of the gospel” but to strive “side by side” with them. No one sitting on the sidelines. Not when we have such good news to get out to neighbors. Not when we have such good news to live by ourselves.

Surely to be a Christian means to share the same mind and to share the same mission. The mind we share is that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God and the mission we share is that Jesus is the Lord before whom every knee must bow.

The Worship of Christ

Differences in our thinking easily lead to conflict and division. How hopeless it is to think that unity and harmony and peace on earth will come by our efforts. The harder we try, the more elusive such unity becomes. I’m guessing a few of us had some good debates over the holidays with extended family members who don’t see things the way we do. Sometimes we just give up. We think the conflict will go away if we just avoid the conversation. Why even try? If we’re honest, what we’re really doing is just hoping that our opponent will try harder, that they will finally see things our way and then we can have unity.

Paul is appealing here to a different strategy. If we share this mind of Christ and this mission of Christ is the priority of our lives, then unity will follow. We will see one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, and as fellow ambassadors for Christ.

Look, even we Christians have a lot of different opinions. We don't get always get along. We are divided on so many things, so many important things. We don't see eye-to-eye.

But if we have this in common, if we are participants in the mind of Christ and the mission of Christ, then we have so much more to hold us together.

THE BENEFICIARIES OF CHRIST

It is through our participation in Christ, that we find unity in Christ. It's not unlike the way people are brought together over a shared interest. You can make friends with people who are very different from you when you share a hobby together. We find unity in this city through our shared interest in a professional basketball team. It's the same with Christ.

We who are Christians—we who have been united to Christ, to the incarnate Son of God—we are participants in his life. That is what a Christian is. Jesus is not a model we put up on our shelf and look at occasionally. Jesus is not the way we enhance our lives. He *is* our life.

And as participants in Christ, we are also beneficiaries of Christ. What are the benefits we receive from being in Christ? There are four mentioned here in verse 1. Now these four expressions “are deliberately compressed and vague” because Paul means for them to land on us primarily through our emotions rather than through a rational argument.¹ But we should probably at least understand something about these benefits he's talking about here.

Encouragement in Christ

First, he mentions the encouragement we find in Christ. As participants in Christ, one of the benefits that we experience is the encouragement that comes from devotion to the incarnate Son of God. This encouragement is especially experienced when we face great difficulties in our lives. We worship a God who, we learned in Hebrews, is able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses. How do we know? Because he became incarnate. He lived as a human being, tempted and tested and tried in every way just like you are (Heb 4:15). He is one with us in our humanity. He knows your pain, your struggle. He *knows*.

The struggles we face make us feel alone and isolated. The incarnation tells us that we are not alone. God is with us. If you say, “He's not here anymore, so how does that help?” then you've forgotten that in resurrection and ascension Jesus promised to never abandon us, or leave us orphaned. He is still incarnate; we are still joined to him. We are participants in his incarnate life. We know that whatever the struggle and pain and confusion, we are in Christ. We are destined for resurrection. And that is encouraging.

Comforted by God's Love

The second benefit of participating in Christ is “comfort from love.” *Comfort* is very similar to *encouragement*, but the focus now is on God’s love that brings us this comfort. It is love that motivated God the Father to give us his Son, to give us Christ. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). In giving his Son for us he has clearly communicated his love for us. Does it bring comfort to you to know you are deeply loved by God, that the God who knows everything about you loves you all the same?

It is love, in fact, that motivates God to do everything he does for us. It is easy to miss God’s love, if we have missed Christ. Sometimes it can seem like God is against us, that he doesn’t love us. Does God seem cold and distant? Look to Christ! If you can see the gift of the incarnation you can see the greatness of God’s deep, deep love.

How can you then not be comforted by God’s love once you recall that we are “by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”? Once you recall that it was “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses,” who “made us alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:3-5)? You see the comfort of God’s love only comes through our participation in Christ. But it most certainly comes to us there. It is a great benefit we receive from being in Christ.

Participation in the Spirit

A third benefit that comes to us as participants in Christ is called “participation in the Spirit.” The working of the Spirit in the believer is often mysterious and undetected, to be sure. But what the Scripture tells us is that it is only because the Holy Spirit is given to us that we are even aware of our familial relationship with God. “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:15). You see, if you have experienced the encouragement of Christ and the comfort of God’s love through Christ, then it is because you have been made a beneficiary of God’s own Holy Spirit. And it is because the Holy Spirit has been given to us that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:5).

It is the power of the Holy Spirit that creates this fellowship with God, the encouragement we find in Christ, and the comfort we receive from God’s unconditional love. It is the Holy Spirit who makes us participants in Christ. “Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ,” Romans 8:9 says, “does not belong to” Christ.

So the Spirit is himself a benefit of our being united to Christ. The Bible says that when you heard the gospel of your salvation and believed in Christ, you “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance” (Eph 1:13-14). What a benefit! Oh what a gift!

What more could you possibly want? Really? What could be a greater benefit than these that come to us from the triune God: the encouragement of the Son, the love of the Father, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit?

Something is wrong, seriously wrong, if you are not moved by such benefits. Perhaps you aren't moved because you have not experienced them. It could be, friend, that you do not enjoy the benefits of Christ because you are not a participant in Christ. That is, you've never been united to Christ. Perhaps you are not a Christian after all.

I am not meaning to trouble any who truly belong to Christ. But it might be that God will use this exposition of some of the benefits that come to those who are in Christ to draw some today who are in darkness into the light of Christ.

Affection and Sympathy

There is one more benefit that comes to those who are united to Christ. This benefit is called "affection and sympathy" in the ESV. It seems that he is referring to the experience of God's compassion and mercy toward us in such a way that it produces these same qualities in us.² Those who have been united to Christ, who participate in his life, cannot help but be transformed by the overwhelming encouragement and love and fellowship that is given to us by the triune God. It is another benefit that we have—another grace, another gift—that comes as a result of being made participants in Christ.

And from here Paul drives his point home. "Complete my joy." He wants those who have experienced such benefits from being in Christ to have "the same mind" and "the same love" with one another, to be "in full accord" with one another. To be of "one mind."

Because we have been united to Christ and made beneficiaries of his model life, we are also transformed by his life so radically that we can find harmony with *anyone else* who is also united to Christ.

WITNESSES TO CHRIST

This is, in fact, what the model of the incarnation is all about. It is not about us coming to Christ and trying to imitate his incarnation. It is, instead, about God coming to us, making us participants in the ongoing work of new creation "in which the dividing walls between cultures are overcome in Christ."⁵ The result is that those who have been made participants in Christ, who receive all his benefits, are also made witnesses of Christ, pointing beyond ourselves to the one who is the source of this new creation life.

The Inimitable Incarnation

This is why Christ came, why God became incarnate. It was not just to save us, but to make us into his witnesses.

But see now how he does it. He does it by becoming incarnate and living a model life, not so that we could try to imitate him but so that we could be incorporated into him. For one, we simply cannot imitate the incarnation. We do not have a pre-incarnate existence from which to descend into by becoming human. The incarnation of the Son of God is a unique event. It cannot be imitated or duplicated.

But the incarnation of Christ is still a model. Jesus is the perfect human being; he is what we were meant to be but because of sin never can be. But this is just the point. The miracle of the union of God and man in the one person Jesus Christ tells us that by a similar miracle—the miracle of new birth, as the Bible calls it, we have been united to Christ. His life is our life. And so we have been united to God forever.

Conformity to Christ

Make no mistake. Because we've been united to God forever by being united to his Son, we are also being changed. Second Corinthians 3:18 says that all of us who behold "the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image." And 1 John 3:2 says that while "we are God's children now," one day, "when he appears" again, "we shall be like him."

It is futile to tell those who have not been united to Christ by faith to imitate him or to be like him. But it is *not* futile to command those who *are* in Christ to be like him. Indeed this is what the Bible does often. We are to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires" (Rom 13:14). Precisely because we have been joined to Christ, we are commanded to participate in "the humble, obedient, cruciform life and death of Jesus Christ."⁴ In the words of our text, to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Phil 2:3) or to "look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil 2:4).

Yes, the incarnation is a model. Jesus shows us who we already are: children of God. And because we are children of God, Jesus shows us what he is transforming us day by day into being, a people who are conformed to his cross-shaped life. Here's how one writer puts it:

By participating in Christ's righteousness, believers receive forgiveness of their sins, and as they continue to participate in Christ, the Spirit directs their lives and actions after the pattern of Christ.⁵

Gathered and Sent

This is what it means to be his witnesses. The best salesmen of a product are those who are themselves participants in the product. And the only way we can truly witness for Christ is by being participants in Christ where we enjoy the benefits that come from Christ and then cannot help "but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

And this is also why the model of the incarnation transforms our relationships with one another. You see, Jesus is not a model for us to go out and copy, as if we could be, individually, imitations of the Messiah. Rather, Jesus is a model into which we have been incorporated, together. We are the pieces of the model. We are the body of Christ. We are being joined together, a corporate witness to the one to whom we all belong.

¹ Moisés Silva, *Philippians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Robert Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), [87-88](#).

² Gordon D Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), [182](#).

³ J. Todd Billings, *Union with Christ: Reframing Theology and Ministry for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 124.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.