The Incarnation and Salvation

ARTICLE FOR UNIT ONE

Whether we like it or not, everyone reads the Bible through a set of lenses that gives shape to what we read. Those of us who live in the western world are heirs of an interpretative tradition that was given shape by the legal mentality of the Graeco-Roman world. Thus we tend to view salvation in judicial terms, which means we focus on guilt and the forgiveness of sins. When we think about the divine provision for the acceptance of the guilty, we tend to focus attention on the cross and the death of Christ and interpret it in a way that has Jesus bearing the penalty of sin on our behalf. The purpose of the incarnation was simply to provide an offering for sins. If, on the other hand, we were natives of the eastern cultures, we would likely look at the situation differently.

The fact is that this distinction marked a significant contrast between eastern and western Christianity. The early eastern fathers of the Church laid their primary emphasis on the incarnation and instead of focusing on guilt and its forgiveness, they stressed the incarnation and its provision for the transformation of humanity. In technical theological terms, this means that the west emphasized justification whereas the east emphasized sanctification. Followers of John Wesley’s teaching have come to recognize that while he had a strong teaching about justification, his primary emphasis was on sanctification partly because he was profoundly influenced by the early eastern (i.e., Greek-speaking fathers, such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Macarius the Egyptian).

Irenaeus, who was the most important theologian of the early church, by following the Genesis creation narrative, taught that humankind was created in the image and likeness of God. He seems to have been the first theologian to make much use of this biblical teaching. It became central to Wesley’s understanding. According to Irenaeus, when the first pair sinned, the result was two-fold: (1) humankind became susceptible to death and (2) they became captive to Satan. This meant both that they were now unable to fulfill their created destiny (reflect the image of God) and that, being captive, they were unable to help themselves.

Through the incarnation, Christ did two things: (1) He broke the power of Satan and (2) restored humanity to eternal life. Irenaeus reasoned that since the fall occurred by disobedience, restoration must occur through obedience, the obedience of the Incarnate One. This is the basis for a view of the atonement that emphasizes Christ’s victory over the enemy, commonly called the Christus victor motif, which W. M. Greathouse has emphasized as having tremendous power for the Wesleyan message of sanctification.* In order to accomplish this, Christ must be fully divine and fully human, what the later ecumenical creeds came to affirm as orthodoxy.

Against those who denied His deity saying He was only a man (Ebionites), Irenaeus asked: “How can they be saved unless he was God who wrought their salvation on the earth?” Against those who denied His humanity saying He was only a divine figure appearing to be human (Gnostics) he declared: “Had he not as man overcome man’s adversary, the enemy would not have been justly overcome.”

In accomplishing salvation, said Irenaeus, Christ “passed through every stage of life, restoring to each age fellowship with God . . . For as through the disobedience of one man, who was the first man, fashioned out of virgin soil, many were made sinners; so it was necessary that through the obedience of one man, who was the first to be born of a virgin, many should be justified and receive salvation.” Another of the eastern fathers, Gregory of Nazianzen, laid down a principle that highlighted the importance of the incarnation as involving both a divine and human nature for salvation to become possible: “The unassumed is the unhealed; . . . if [Adam’s] nature fell in its totality, then it must all be united to the nature of him who was begotten, and thus be saved in its totality.” Thus for a “full salvation,” there must be a full incarnation.

Why was the forgiveness of sins not sufficient? It was Athanasius who decisively addressed that question. In order for God to fully remedy the results of the fall, He must make provision not only for the forgiveness of sins but also for the transformation of humanity into the image of God that was lost. He based his view on the goodness of God and declared “but repentance could not guard the consistency of God’s character” for repentance does not “recall men from what is according to their nature, but only makes them cease from their sins.” There must also be a provision for transformation into the image of God. The term these fathers used as the goal of salvation was divination, a term that is easily misunderstood. It has scriptural support in passages like 2 Peter 1:4 and simply means the restoration of humanity to the image of God, which was John and Charles Wesley’s central understanding of the goal of sanctification.

Both Irenaeus and Athanasius summarized this understanding of the centrality of the incarnation as the means to full salvation by the wonderful phrase: “Our Lord Jesus Christ, the word of God, of his boundless love, became what we are that he might make us what he himself is.”


by H. Ray Dunning
Professor emeritus of theology, Trevecca Nazarene University; author of Grace, Faith and Holiness: A Wesleyan Systematic Theology