



Thank you for your interest in Look at the Church—a year-long study of the “bride of Christ.”

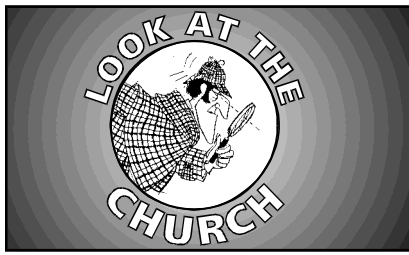
The pages which follow include:

- A “Member Manual” that gives an overview of this series (8 pages)
- A sample sermon/class outline (5 pages)
- A sample handout (2 pages)
- A sample small group handout (2 pages)

Again, thank you for your interest in our material. If you have questions or want to place an order, contact us at:

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MEMBER MANUAL

Table of Contents

- Why should we
Look at the Church? 1
- The Three Legs of
Look at the Church 3
- Sermon Series 4
- Adult Classes and
Small Groups 6
- Toolbox for
Look at the Church 8

Today's church has fallen on hard times. Of course, times are always "difficult" for the people of God in one way or another. In the first century, there were persecutions and the challenges of paganism. In the second, the church fought off perverse heresies. In the third, institutionalism undermined personal commitment. In every age, the church has faced strenuous and often brutal opposition.

Our "hard times" are not particularly brutal or even overt. But the dangers faced by the church of the present seem especially menacing precisely because of their subtlety. We live in an increasingly "post-Christian" culture, where Christ's ethic and world-view command less respect or even toleration. To the "me generation," whose motto is "live and let live," a community that calls its members to "die to self and live for the Lord" is distasteful. When the only experience many in our world have of the church is either the hype of TV evangelists or the lifeless liturgies of their childhood, it is little wonder that many see the bride of Christ as irrelevant and faintly ridiculous.

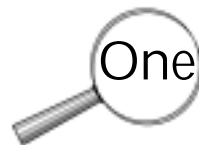
But what makes these times particularly challenging has far more to do with ourselves than with the world. We are facing an identity crisis in today's church, a struggle with who we are and what we should be about, that threatens to undo us. It is not the prejudice or scorn of the surrounding culture which we should fear but our own ignorance and misunderstanding regarding the church. How can others be expected to understand us when we do not understand ourselves?

- Appreciation for the church can no longer be assumed even among those who claim a relationship with Christ. "Jesus, yes; the church, no!" expresses the sentiment of a growing number who profess Jesus, but have a hard time understanding the role of the church in their lives. Recent surveys suggest that four-fifths of Americans arrive at their own religious views without regard to a body of believers. As one respondent to a Gallup poll on the church said: "I am my own church."

- Many others, who “go to church” and “belong to a church,” have no notion of what the church is. Misconceptions range from confusing the church with a building to confusing a particular group of believers with “The Church.” At the very least, we have lost a grand vision of the church as God’s present incarnation in a lost and dying world. As a result, we struggle with a poor image of the community of Jesus Christ which leaves us feeling inadequate and weak.
- How individual Christians relate to the church is equally confusing for many. In practice, attendance has become the primary criterion for church membership. That the church should expect members to conform to a Christ-like ethic, to support the body with their time, talents and resources, to develop and protect a loving fellowship, and to submit to godly leadership, constitutes something akin to invasion of privacy for many church-goers. For them, such expectations are bad enough. *Enforcing* them, through active discipleship and discipline, leads easily to charges of cultism.
- Finally, there is confusion about the primary functions of the church. What does God want the church to be about? What is its mission? What is central and what is peripheral to the behavior of Christ’s body? Some argue that the “church” is a worshiping entity; others see it as a tool for service; still others maintain it is the recruitment arm for God’s kingdom. Meanwhile, we suffer from a “paralysis of analysis” that keeps us from functioning in an effective, focused and unified manner. The world is lost, people are suffering, injustices go unchallenged, and our culture goes rancid for lack of Christian salt.

What is needed among us is a ringing affirmation that the church is the living incarnation of our Lord. We are his body, his family. We are “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way”. The church has been in the mind of God since the beginning of creation. So precious and beloved are we that Jesus died to save and sanctify us. Through the church, God is completing his plans, working his power, and reconciling the world to himself. We are not just little groups of people, stuck away in towns and villages, hanging on until Jesus returns. We are a “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.”

If we are to be the kind of church God desires, it is imperative that we take some time to **Look at the Church**. This year-long study is designed to inform us about the church of the past, to help us think about the nature and mission of the church today, and to create a vision which can shape the church of tomorrow. Join us for a close look at what the church is and how you relate to it.



One of our great allies at present is the Church itself. Do not misunderstand me. I do not mean the church as we see her spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners.

That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately it is quite invisible to these humans.

Screwtape, a senior devil, instructing a junior devil on how to tempt humans.
C. S. Lewis, The Screwtape Letters.

Look at the Church is a year-long, congregation-wide, intensive study of the church. It focuses a specific group of people (your congregation) on a particular topic (God's church) for a considerable period of time (one year). It is "intensive" because it uses sermons, Bible classes, and small groups to accomplish its goals. Though your congregation may implement **Look at the Church** differently, the basic format is as follows:

- On Sunday mornings, the sermons will help us think about church-related ideas: who we are; what our mission is; how we relate to each other, the world and our Lord. (See pp. 4-5 for a summary of sermon series.) Every week, you will receive a handout that includes a summary of the sermon, implications, and key texts. Studying about the church during our assemblies will encourage deeper discussions during the week.
- For Bible classes, we will study the church of the first century and think through some practical issues which today's church must address. (See pp. 6-7 for a summary of classes.) Each week you will receive a class handout, summarizing and highlighting important points and implications. Bible classes are an integral part of **Look at the Church**; please make plans to be with us during this time of reflection and discussion.
- One of the best ways to apply the principles we will study is to be part of a small group. Groups help us to "walk what we talk" by promoting personal application of what might otherwise remain only "good ideas". Christians need the encouragement that small gatherings can provide.

Every carpenter knows a three-legged stool is the most stable seating design. Think of the sermons, classes, and small groups as the three legs of the **Look at the Church** program. Involve yourself in each and build a stable relationship with the church Jesus loves.

The Three Legs of Look at the Church



Many Christians have been infected with the most virulent virus of modern American life, what sociologist Robert Bellah calls "radical individualism". They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that matters is "Jesus and me", but in so doing miss the point altogether.

For Christianity is not a solitary belief system. . . . There is no such thing as Christianity apart from the church.

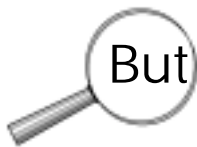
Charles Colson, *The Body*.

Sermon Series

The sermons this year will both comfort and challenge you. It is not the intention of **Look at the Church** to repeat what we already know, but to encourage us to think more deeply and broadly about God's church. You should expect that some old truths will be reaffirmed and some new insights will be recommended. The result should be a better understanding of who we are and how God wants us to behave.

Each week you will receive a handout (similar to that on the following page) which will prepare you to hear and to remember the sermon. Key texts and points are reviewed. A summary of the sermon will help you know where the lesson is going.

To help you keep organized, the series name (e.g., "The Second Incarnation") and that week's lesson title (e.g., "God in the Flesh") are displayed in the upper right corner of the handout. An icon of an open Bible will identify all sermon handouts.



But you are a chosen people,
a royal priesthood,
a holy nation,
a people belonging to God,
that you may
declare the praises of him
who called you out of darkness
into his wonderful light.

1 Peter 2:9

The series we will explore are:

The Urge to Merge (3 weeks)

Fish school . . . wolves pack . . . whales pod. What do people do when they seek community and the safety of numbers? They *church*. Christianity is a communal activity. Before we can understand what the church is, we must recognize our need for other Christians. "There is no such thing as Christianity apart from the church."

Nehemiah (9 weeks)

The great story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of Jerusalem provides a vivid model for thinking about building the church today. Lessons in leadership, community, sacrifice and work, dealing with conflict, and the need for constant revival and restoration—all this and more is found in Nehemiah's long struggle to make God's city safe again.

"To What Shall I Compare it?" (5 weeks)

The Bible uses a variety of metaphors to help us understand the church. We will examine several of the most important of these and see that they stress the functions which the church is expected to fulfill. By studying what the church is "like" we can learn what God wants us to actually be.

"Let the Church Be the Church" (14 weeks)

The book of Ephesians contains some of the clearest and most powerful teaching about the church in all the Bible. It's importance to God, the relationship of the church to Christ, the power available to the church through the Spirit are the consistent themes of this great book. Most of all, the church as the "fullness of him," the "body" of Christ, "one flesh" with Christ is stressed throughout. Paul teaches that we are the incarnation of Christ. And he shows us how to live up to such a high calling.

The Second Incarnation (4 weeks)

Above all things, the church ought to manifest the personality and purposes of Jesus Christ. We are called to *be* Christ for the world. As such, the church functions as an *incarnation* of the risen Jesus. Our identity and ministry is an expression of Christ's character. This series is a call to commit ourselves to building a church modelled on the characteristics of our Lord.

A Church that Flies (4 weeks)

If we are committed to building a church which incarnates the "personality and purposes of Jesus," what would such a church look like? This series will define the church by identifying some of the central functions to which God has always called his people in every age. A church committed to evangelism, worship, service, fellowship, and the development of disciples may discover that a passion for function frees us from a slavery to forms.

GOD IN THE FLESH

... God was incarnate once through the birth of a baby... and lived out the personal meaning of "God with us" in a hostile environment. He has endeavored to be incarnate once again through a fellowship larger than any geographical boundaries or religious divisions in order to achieve the eternal meaning of "God with us" in a still hostile environment.

In the first incarnation, a bodily presence was a practical necessity for his mission. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Heb 2:14-15).

In the second incarnation, a bodily presence was not a practical necessity for his mission. ... but to be resurrected at the world via his physical body in the first incarnation, we see him functioning in the world today through his spiritual body in the second incarnation.

Just as he was God with us when a physical body at Jesus of Nazareth, so in his name God incarnate is a spiritual body in the church. When that church is healthy and engaged in its proper work, it becomes Christ's very presence in the world. It is not as what he created, as in art. It is the graced work of his ministry and to be chosen whether his being in the world is fullness rather than a mere mimicry.

Bible Study and Disciple Making
The Second Incarnation pp. 49-53-54

THINK ABOUT IT:

1. Incarnation always involves limitation. What limits did God accept when he became man? What limits must he work within or be free through his death?
2. How do the church's mission (1 Cor 10:33) and ministry (1 Cor 10:33) differ from the church's mission and ministry? How do they differ from the church's mission and ministry?

THE SECOND INCARNATION
Page 1

Implications

1. What does our community see when it sees our church? Does it see light and life and love? Does it see joy and confidence and hope? Does it see Jesus?
2. What do you experience in our church's fellowship? Do you experience light and life and love? Do you experience joy and confidence and hope? Do you experience Jesus?
3. How does knowing that the person above the pulpit there you is part of God's second incarnation greatly your relationship together? Think of three practical steps you can encourage a new Christ the church. How do it?

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). Faith in that statement is necessary to be a Christian. That the carpenter from Nazareth was more than a good man or a wise teacher—that he was "God with us" (Emmanuel)—is the bottom line assertion of the Christian religion.

But that means something quite extraordinary. Jesus is God. In his personality and character, we see what God is like. In his ministry and mission, we can discern what is important to the Father. In his teaching, we see how the very words and thoughts of our Creator.

Gradually, we have grasped this idea and worked from the known to the unknown, from Jesus whom "we have looked at and our hands have touched" to the invisible God. Because Jesus is God-in-the-flesh, we see the "glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

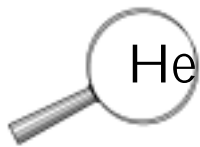
The church is also an incarnation. We are the "fulfillment of Christ," the body and visible image of him. Today's church is Jesus re-created in the fleshly clothing of our own fleshly selves. And that means something quite extraordinary. In our personality and character, we should reflect the mind of Jesus. In our ministry and mission, it should be evident what was important to our Lord. In our teaching, the very words of Jesus should come alive again.

The result of God's incarnation in the church must also be revelation. The world should see Jesus when it looks at us. People hungry for God should recognize that "God is really among you" when they spend time with God's people. Because the church is Jesus become flesh, it should be possible to see the glory of Jesus in the face of the church.

The implications of this are astounding. It is the primary duty of the church to reflect the attributes of its master. In its identity, community, and ongoing mission, the church should be most concerned to shape itself after the image of Christ. When a church ceases to reveal Christ, when it no longer possesses the ardency to answer the world with the power of its love or the selflessness of its service, it has ceased to function incarnationally. And a church which does not reveal Jesus to a lost world cannot be the church that Jesus wants.

THE SECOND INCARNATION
Page 2

Adult Classes and Small Groups



He cannot have God for his father
who does not have
the church for his mother.

Augustine

Apart from the church,
salvation is impossible.

Martin Luther

The church is like Noah's ark:
The stench inside would be unbearable if it
weren't for the storm outside.

Charles Colson

As we **Look at the Church** this year, we will use our Sunday morning class hour to explore a series of topics pertinent to the church's history, mission, and place in Scripture. The classes will give us a forum where we can question and discuss those issues vital to the life of the Christian community.

Every week, you will receive a class handout similar to the one reproduced on the following page. Each handout will highlight important ideas, thought-provoking questions, and themes central to that week's study. In particular, we want to examine implications and practical applications of the things we are learning.

To keep the handouts organized, we have included some elements that you may find helpful. Note the hand-&-pen symbol with the page number. All class material can be identified by this graphic. In addition, the class name (e.g., "Portraits of the Church") and that week's title (e.g., "Introduction and Overview") will be displayed in the upper right hand corner.

Among the topics we will explore:

Portraits of the Church

The purpose of this class is to examine the church of the first century with fresh eyes and to notice both the commonalities and the peculiarities of individual congregations.

Eight Christian communities will be studied: Jerusalem, Antioch, Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus, Colosse, and Rome. By noting where these churches exhibited uniformity and where they differed, we will learn what is central to the church and what is peripheral. But this is no dry academic exercise. Our aim will be to discern our identity as the church of the Twentieth Century and beyond.

Among Friends

The fact that some Christians feel uncomfortable with the intimate community portrayed in the New Testament indicates a misunderstanding of what the Church is all about. The Church is more than its beliefs and ceremonies and sanctuaries. It is *people* who are learning to love each other as their Lord has loved them. True religion is not just private and vertical, it is communal and horizontal as well.

A vibrant Christian fellowship is not only the expectation of the gospel but its validation as well. Our most powerful answer to the skeptic's doubt is not found in reasoned arguments but in real relationships. When the Church is a gathering of true friends, it offers the world its most compelling apologetic.

Christians have been meeting in small groups ever since the Jerusalem church began. Such gatherings provide opportunities for fellowship, education and Christian growth. The small group handouts for **Look at the Church** are designed for groups of 10-15 adults. Using the Sunday morning lessons as a springboard, these studies help us to better understand and apply what we are learning.

As with the sermon and class handouts, we have included some elements to help you keep organized. (See the reproduction to the right.) Note the cup-of-coffee symbol with the page number. All small group material can be identified by this graphic. The series name (e.g., "The Urge to Merge") and that week's study (e.g., "Declaration of Dependence") should be the same as the sermon handout for that particular week.

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Personality Traits
The characteristics of each church—prominent traits and tendencies—will be listed in this space. This brief list with simple references should provide an informative basis for personal study and reflection.

Major Strengths
Strong points of these churches will be listed here, with references to supporting passages. As with individuals, churches have different strengths and weaknesses, which should encourage us as we look at our own abilities and limits.

Major Weaknesses
Problem areas will be listed here, focusing primarily on congregational conflicts, tensions, or the impact of culture. Each congregation in the New Testament faced specific challenges, which should encourage us as we deal with challenges of our own.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, we will examine one of the churches spoken about in the New Testament. To understand these churches, it is important to understand something of the culture in which we find them and to know how they were established.

This space will contain information about the city—Rome, Ephesus, Colossae, etc.—in which the church lives and briefly describe the dominant culture of the place. Information about customs, religion, mores, and the history of the area will be given. Most importantly, cultural factors which were likely to affect the church and which help us to understand the particular strengths and challenges faced by God's people in that place will be reviewed.

In addition, we will review the beginnings of each church: how it was founded, who was instrumental in starting that church, who were the first converts. The book of Acts will provide most of our information.

The map above indicates the eight churches we will study during the course of this class. They were chosen because we have more information on these churches than any others in the New Testament.

THE URGE TO MERGE
CLASS HANOUT 1

(Continued on next page)

DECLARATION OF DEPENDENCE

Small Group Member's Guide

ICE BREAKER

"Everything worth having is worth working for." Do we still believe there is truth in this old adage? What does it mean to you? How do you apply this truth in your daily life now? Can you give some examples of only wanting something as a child—and waking up your allowance to buy it? A doll, a bicycle, a football glove? Did it mean more to you because you had to work for it?

LIFE IN OUR SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

Let's paint a scene together. Above the tops of the trees that ring us there is only a sunny blue, bright sky. Shimmering, pulsing light plays off the leaves and pools on the lush, thick grasses underneath. Birds are everywhere above. Young of several species seem to be engaged in a tumultuous game of tag. A single, mistle thrush, ignored by the playful young, clumps easily against a large tree.

He has been asleep but now awakes, breathing, he pulls up short with an unconcerned pout on his side. Rather disinterestedly he watches the animals running about around him. Suddenly, a rattle the clatter of their play, a familiar and appreciated sound is heard. The mistle thrush recognizes the sound of God moving through the woods toward him.

Running toward God, he stops and stands in wonder. Another, very like the mistle, is with God.

"I have someone for you to meet, Man. There's made her suitable for you. You'll no longer be alone."

And to the great, reverent admission in consent a hat begins. God, man, and woman begin the process of maintaining unity by reaffirming self. Self, however, is a power not to be taken lightly. "Some it will assist in desire over the good of community."

THE URGE TO MERGE
CLASS HANOUT 1

Toolbox for Look at the Church

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Recommended General Reading

— These books, all on the subject of Christ's church, will make an excellent addition to your library. They will also be helpful as you think through the issues we will be studying this year.

Leonard Allen. *The Cruciform Church: Becoming a Cross-Shaped People in a Secular World.* Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1990.

Leonard Allen, Richard Hughes, and Michael Weed. *The Worldly Church: A Call for Biblical Renewal.* Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1988.

Charles Colson. *The Body.* Dallas: Word Publishing, 1992.

James Hinkle and Tim Woodroof. *Among Friends.* Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1989.

Karen Hinkley (Ed.). *Life Change Series.* The volumes on Nehemiah and Ephesians will be helpful to you. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985.

Jeremy Jackson. *No Other Foundation: The Church through Twenty Centuries.* Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1980.

Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand.* Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1957.

Francis Schaeffer, *The Church at the End of the 20th Century.* Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1977.

Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris, *The Second Incarnation: A Theology for the 21st Century Church.* West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing Co., 1992.

James Woodroof, *The Church in Transition.* Searcy, AR: The Bible House, 1990.

Commentaries

George Findlay, *Studies in John's Epistles.*

Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1989.

John R.W. Stott, *God's New Society: The Message of Ephesians.* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979.

Throntveit, Mark, *Ezra-Nehemiah.* Interpretation. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989.

God in the Flesh

Introduction

[Have your son or daughter come to the pulpit. Or choose another father/son pair to bring forward for illustrative purposes. For best results, choose a pair that noticeably resemble one another.]

1. My son incarnates me.
 - a. He shares my genes, my blood. He is my son.
 - b. More than that, he embodies much of who I am, my character and personality and essence.
 - c. By the very nature of things, he will personify me, he will embody me, he will reveal me.
2. Years from now:
 - a. people who know us both will say, "He is the spitting image of his father." They will use all the clichés normally reserved for fathers and sons:
 - ⇒ He is a chip off the old block.
 - ⇒ The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree.
 - ⇒ He is his father's son.
 - ⇒ Some of you probably are thinking how tragic all this is for the child! But it is something I take great pride in.
 - b. People who have never met me will be able to tell much about who I was by looking at my son, for though he will be himself, in many and profound ways he will also be me.

Transition: Define "incarnation"

1. *Carnal*—pertaining to the body, flesh.
 - a. *Carnation*—a flesh-colored flower.
 - b. *Carnival*—a festival appealing to the flesh. Originally, a party thrown just before Lent to indulge the flesh prior to the Lenten season of fasting and mourning.
 - c. *Carnivore*—a flesh-eating animal.
2. *Incarnation*—to invest with a body; to be the embodiment of.

I. Jesus is the Incarnation of God

A. The Meaning of Incarnation

1. Jesus of Nazareth was a human being.
 - a. He was born of a woman. He had brothers and sisters.
 - b. He ate and slept and went to the bathroom.
 - c. He worked with his hands and felt fatigue and knew pain.
2. Yet Christians believe Jesus was more than human . . . he was God in the flesh.
 - a. The prophets announced that Jesus would be called “Immanuel”—God with us.
 - b. Matthew and Luke testify that Jesus was born of a virgin, conceived by the Holy Spirit, the “son” of God in a quite literal sense.
 - c. Our belief is that, in Jesus, God became flesh and wrapped himself in human form and lived among us as a man.
3. That belief is foundational to Christianity.
 - a. Some of the earliest *heresies* to threaten the church rejected an incarnational understanding of Jesus. The *Docetic, Unitarians, Montanists, and Arians*.
 - b. Some of the earliest creeds of Christendom affirmed belief in the incarnation as basic to the Christian faith. The Nicene Creed (A.D. 325):

“We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, that is, of *the essence of the Father*, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God . . .”

B. The Evidence of Incarnation

1. Jesus understood himself to be God's incarnation.
 - a. **Read Jn 14:5-11a**
 - b. He had no hesitation in making bold assertions regarding his nature.
 - i. “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).
 - ii. “When [anyone] looks at me, he sees the one who sent me” (Jn 12:45)
 - iii. “The Father is in me, and I [am] in the Father” (Jn 10:38).
2. John does not hesitate to make such claims for Jesus.
 - a. **Read Jn 1:1-2, 14, 18**
 - b. His entire gospel is written from an incarnational perspective.
 - c. He marvels in his first letter that “that which was from the beginning,” the “Word of life,” he had seen with his eyes and his hands had touched.
3. The author of Hebrews asserts the same truth—**Read Heb 1:1-3a**
4. So does Paul in his letters—**Read Col 1:19; 2:9**

C. The Implications of Incarnation

1. People who know Jesus well understand that he claims to be the “spitting image of his father.” He embodies God’s character and essence. He personifies God.
2. The beauty of incarnational Christology is that we can work our way from Jesus back to God. Though we have never seen the invisible God, we can know him through the tangible Christ.

II. The Church is the Incarnation of Jesus

A. The meaning of Incarnation for the Church

1. The church is made up of human beings—weak, struggling, harried people.
2. Yet the church is more than human . . . *we also are an incarnation of God.*
 - a. Our hands are God's hands; our mouths are God's mouth.
 - b. We are created in his image and radiate his glory for the world to see.
 - c. We are a city set on a hill, the light of the world, the salt of the earth—not because of our goodness or superior spirituality, but because God has taken up residence in his church and manifests his glory through us.
3. This belief is also foundational to Christianity.
 - a. Many Christians—who would never for a moment doubt that Jesus is God in the flesh—have no understanding that the church is Jesus Christ wrapped in the fleshly covering of our own feeble selves.
 - b. Yet such an understanding is vital if we are to discover our true nature and discern our true work.

B. The evidence of Incarnation

1. **Read Jn 1:12-13**
 - a. Who are these people who are “born of God”?
 - b. In the same passage and with the same language John describes the incarnation of God through Jesus, he also describes the incarnation of God through those who believe. That's us!
2. **Read Lk 10:16**
 - a. Setting: sending out the 72—one of the earliest instances of “church”
 - b. Notice the parallel that Jesus develops in this passage:
 - i. To reject Jesus is to reject “the one who sent” him. Implied is the notion that Jesus and God are so intimately connected that your reaction to the one determines your reaction to the other.
 - ii. Jesus says the same relationship exists between disciples and himself.
 - To reject those who witness to Christ is to reject Christ himself.
 - To receive the one is to have the other.
 - Again, the implication is that Jesus and his disciples are connected.
3. **Read Ac 9:3-5**
 - a. Setting: Saul's “breathing murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.”
 - b. The question is not, “Why are you persecuting my church?” Rather, “Why *me?*”
 - c. When Saul arrests and imprisons and puts to death those who belong to “the way,” he is persecuting Jesus himself.
4. Paul clearly took this lesson to heart, for much of his language describing the church is “incarnational” language. One example: **Read Eph 1:22-23.**
 - a. The word Paul uses to describe Jesus—*pleroma* (the *fullness* of God)—is the very word Paul uses now to describe the church—the *fullness* of Christ.
 - b. And the fact that Paul should call the church “the body” (*sarx*) of Christ when Jesus himself is said to be the Word become “flesh” (*sarx*) is profound and significant. We will talk more about the church as “body” next week.

III. The Radical Implications of Incarnation

A. Towards an Old Definition of "Church"

1. Quote from Shelly and Harris, *The Second Incarnation*, pp. 53-54.

Just as he was God incarnate in a physical body as Jesus of Nazareth, so is he now God incarnate in a spiritual body as the church. When that church is healthy and engaged in its proper work, it becomes Christ's very presence in the world. It carries on what he started among us. It is the grand finale to his ministry and is his chosen vehicle for living in the world in fullness rather than in mere memory.

2. Do you hear that? The church is *Jesus* wrapped in the fleshly covering of our own feeble selves. And that means something quite extraordinary.

- a. What is our identity?

- i. When we understand the church properly, we cannot think of ourselves primarily in terms of structures or creeds or activities or traditions.
- ii. The church exists, rather, to be the "spitting image" of its Master. We embody Christ's character and essence. We personify Jesus.
- iii. We are "Jesus people" in the truest sense of the term.

- b. What is our work?

- i. To carry on the ministry and mission of our Lord.
- ii. To portray in our world the passions and priorities of our Master.

B. Becoming a Church that reflects our Lord.

1. Just as we can move from an understanding of Jesus to a knowledge of the invisible God, so too can we move from an understanding of Jesus to a knowledge of who we are to be as his church.

- a. In our identity, community, worship and work, the church should be concerned to shape itself after the image of Christ.

- b. Whatever forms the church uses in its assemblies, whatever programs it adopts for ministry, whatever means it uses to express a sense of fellowship, the *result* must be something so Christ-like, so reflective of his character, so *incarnational* that it becomes possible for the world to recognize Jesus in us.

- c. No matter how comfortable we are with our forms, or how confident we feel with our patterns for worship and discipleship, or how many verses we can marshal to justify our practice, if the *result* is not something that bears the impress of Christ's character and priorities, it is not according to the will of God.

2. When a church ceases to reveal Christ—when the world looks at us and can see only our traditions and self-righteousness and squabbling over doctrinal minutia but can no longer see the relevance and power and life-changing truth of the Christ in us—we have ceased to be the church of Christ by any standard or measure which I would value.

Conclusion: I want to belong to the church that carries on the life of Christ.

1. Quote from William Barclay's commentary on Acts, p. 2.

In one sense it is the whole lesson of the Book of Acts that the life of Jesus goes on in His Church. . . . [The story is told of an inquirer from Hinduism who] had read the New Testament, and the story had fascinated him and Christ had laid his spell upon him. . . . He read on . . . and felt he had entered into a new world. In the gospels it was Jesus, His works and His suffering. In the Acts . . . what the disciples did and thought and taught had taken the place that Christ had occupied. The Church continued where Jesus had left off at His death. "Therefore," said this man . . . "I must belong to the Church that carries on the life of Christ."

2. The church is intended to incarnate Jesus—and, ultimately, our Father.

- We share his genes, his blood. We are his children.
- As the church, we are intended to embody much of who God is, his character and personality and essence.
- By the very nature of things, we are meant to personify God, to embody him, to reveal him.

3. I long to be part of a church about which people will say, "They are the spitting image of their father;" . . . about which people will use all the clichés normally reserved for fathers and sons:

- ⇒ They are a chip off the old block.
- ⇒ The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree.
- ⇒ They are their father's sons.

4. I long to be part of a church through which people who have never met God will be able to tell much about who He is by looking at us, for though we are too often ourselves, in many and profound ways we can also be God for this lost world.



GOD IN THE FLESH

God was incarnate once through the birth of a babe . . . and lived out the personal meaning of “God with us” in a hostile environment. He has condescended to be incarnate once again through a fellowship larger than any geographical boundaries or sectarian divisions in order to achieve the societal meaning of “God with us” in a still-hostile environment.

In the first incarnation, a bodily presence was a practical necessity for his mission. “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Heb 2:14-15).

For God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Eph 1:22-23

In the second incarnation, a bodily presence remains a practical necessity for his mission. . . . Just as he functioned in the world via his physical body in the first incarnation, we see him functioning in the world today through his spiritual body in the second incarnation. . . .

Just as he was God incarnate in a physical body as Jesus of Nazareth, so is he now God incarnate in a spiritual body as the church. When that church is healthy and engaged in its proper work, it becomes Christ’s very presence in the world. It carries on what he started among us. It is the grand finale to his ministry and is his chosen vehicle for living in the world in fullness rather than in mere memory.

Rubel Shelly and Randall Harris
The Second Incarnation, pp. 49, 53-54.

THINK ABOUT IT:

- ◆ Incarnation always involves limitations. What limits did God accept when he became man? What limits must he work within as he lives through his church?
- ◆ Since the church incarnates Christ, shouldn’t we expect to find in the church the primary traits and characteristics of our Lord? If we don’t, what might this say about the church?

- ◆ *What does our community see when it sees our church? Does it see light and life and love? Does it see joy and confidence and hope? Does it see Jesus?*
- ◆ *What do you experience in our church's fellowship? Do you experience light and life and love? Do you experience joy and confidence and hope? Do you experience Jesus?*
- ◆ *How does knowing that the person down the pew from you is part of God's second incarnation guide your relationship together? Think of three practical ways you can encourage a more Christ-like church. Then do it!*

WHAT'S YOUR POINT?

"The word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14). Faith in that statement is necessary to be a Christian. That the carpenter from Nazareth was more than a good man or a wise teacher—that he was "God with us" (Emmanuel)—is the bottom-line assertion of the Christian religion.

But that means something quite extraordinary. Jesus is God. In his personality and character, we see what God is like. In his ministry and mission, we can discern what is important to the Father. In his teaching, we are hearing the very words and thoughts of our Creator.

Gratefully, we have grasped this idea and worked from the known to the unknown, from Jesus whom "we have looked at and our hands have touched" to the invisible God. Because Jesus is God-in-the-flesh, we see the "glory of God in the face of Christ" (2Co 4:6).

The church is also an incarnation. We are the "fullness of Christ," the *body* and *aroma* and *image* of him. Today's church is Jesus wrapped in the fleshly covering of our own feeble selves. And that means something quite extraordinary. In our personality and character, we should reflect the mind of Jesus. In our ministry and mission, it should be evident what was important to our Lord. In our teaching, the very words of Jesus should come alive again.

The result of God's incarnation in the church must also be revelation. The world should see Jesus when it looks at us. People hungry for God should recognize that "God is really among you" when they spend time with God's people. Because the church is Jesus become flesh, it should be possible to see the glory of Jesus in the face of the church.

The implications of this are astounding. It is the primary duty of the church to reflect the attributes of its master. In its identity, community, worship and mission, the church should be most concerned to shape itself after the image of Christ. When a church ceases to reveal Christ, when it no longer possesses the radiance to amaze the world with the power of its love or the selflessness of its service, it has ceased to function incarnationally. And a church which does not reveal Jesus to a lost world cannot be the church that Jesus wants.



GOD IN THE FLESH

Small Group Member's Guide

ICE BREAKER

Each of you in the group should indicate one way in which you are the “spittin’ image” of your father or mother. Perhaps you look like your parents in some way. Or maybe you act like them under certain circumstances. Has anyone told you that you remind them of your parents? What were you doing at the time?

COPYCAT!

We all would like to believe that we are absolute originals—that God broke the mold after he made us. We pride ourselves on being individuals, on our uniqueness, on the fact that there is nobody else in the world quite like “me”. Would it be a blow to your pride if I were to suggest that most people, like most great ideas, are pieced together from borrowed parts?

That’s certainly true of us physically. Eyes, hair, physique—all were determined by genes you borrowed from parents, grandparents, and great-grand-parents. It’s a little disconcerting to look through old family pictures and see your hands hanging from the end of great-uncle Harry’s arms! There is little original about us physically—just borrowed bits and pieces that, in combination, take on a unique form.

The same, though, is true in other, more significant ways. Personality, intelligence, mannerisms, aptitudes—the acorn never does fall very far from the oak. Our wit from Aunt Charlene. Our love of nature from Grandpa. That funny look we get when we’re concentrating from Mother. We love to imagine we are unique. Truth is, we are a ragtag collection of the best and worst of those who have gone before us.

We haven’t even spoken yet of the ways we *consciously* adopt the attributes of others. How much of you is shaped by

Continued Next Page...

*Here there is no
Greek or Jew, circumcised or
uncircumcised, barbarian,
Scythian, slave or free, but
Christ is all, and is in all.*

Col 3:11



THE SECOND
INCARNATION

qualities, habits, mannerisms and characteristics you admire in others? We have an amazing ability to imitate what we appreciate in those around us—an ability we use all the time to craft ourselves and constantly improve on the “original.”

In so many ways, a man or woman succeeds or fails, not on the basis of native abilities, but according to the role models he or she chooses to emulate. Recognizing *that* we need to imitate others to improve ourselves, and then *choosing wisely* whom we imitate, goes a long way towards ensuring happy and successful living.

What is true of us individually is also true of the church. While we trumpet our uniqueness and originality, while we crow about this virtue or that attribute, we forget that the church is also bits and pieces borrowed from the heart and mind of our Lord. If we ever grow out of our need to imitate Jesus and shape ourselves after him, we may find that we have outgrown our usefulness and purpose.

It is unfortunately true that the church’s imitation of Jesus does not come as naturally as the child’s imitation of the parent. There is no genetic factor working for us. The imitation which takes place in a church occurs consciously, deliberately, thoughtfully. It requires the church to repeat to itself, like a mantra, “We desire to be like Jesus.” That commitment, once made, can never be taken for granted; it requires frequent and constant reaffirmation if the church of tomorrow is to reflect its Lord with the same vigor as the church of today.

The result of that commitment is a church which reminds people of nothing so much as Jesus of Nazareth. The world will not walk away from meeting such a church impressed with its uniqueness. It will be impressed with the degree to which that church has been conformed to its Lord.

I want to be part of no other church. I am unashamed to belong to a group of believers who cares little for originality and everything for Christ. I don’t want to be known for my doctrines or positions but for my eagerness to incarnate Jesus. I have no ambitions to impress the world, save for my single-minded devotion to look and live like the Lord.

Call me a copycat. Ridicule me for losing myself in the imitation of Christ. Accuse me of belonging to nothing more than a church pieced together of parts borrowed from Jesus. That is high praise for me. It would be for you also, I think.

To Discuss

- ◆ *Do you agree that the fundamental mission of the church is to incarnate Jesus? Why do you agree (or disagree)?*
- ◆ *Can you give examples of ways in which the church is no more than “borrowed bits and pieces” of the heart and mind of Jesus?*
- ◆ *Do you think it is possible for a church to get so involved in religion that it fails to remind anyone of its Lord? What do you imagine Jesus would have to say about such a situation?*
- ◆ *What does Paul mean when, in Colossians 3:11, he suggests that no other distinctions, claims to uniqueness, or diversities matter where “Christ is all and is in all”? Does this passage support what we’ve talked about in this session?*
- ◆ *Read the last two paragraphs to the left. Do you agree with what is said there?*