Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement

By Michael Frost

Reviewed by Darren Cronshaw

Excommunication—removing ourselves from the world and embodiment—is a characteristic of contemporary digital society that also distorts Christian spirituality and education. Missional leader Michael Frost’s latest book, Incarnate: The Body of Christ in an Age of Disengagement, is a wide-ranging critique of incarnational attitudes and practices, and calls the body of Christ to engage locally and globally with real people and their issues.

The book begins with analysis of the philosophical and historical background to the divisions and dualism of postmodern society and its tendency to be “rootless, disengaged and screen addicted.” Technology allows us to engage with the world through our screens and devices. Worship invites us to express intensely emotional feelings into our songs, without acknowledging how we experience God through serving others or relating to the poor and the lost. The soul is valued over the body, the individual over community, the life of hope human over the current state of earth. Christians seem to want to retreat from a dystopian society rather than engage thoughtfully and bring deep healing to our neighborhoods. Frost bemoans: “Christianity has become an out-of-body experience—personalized, privatized, customized—and it’s being ditched up to us by clergy increasing disconnected from an incarnational expression of faith.”

Frost upholds a high view of the body. He critiques unhelpful dehumanizations of the self as spirit, soul and body (usually arranged in that order of priority). Instead suggesting, with Nancy Murphy, that we are “spiritual bodies.” Moreover, he presents a high view of vocation, celebrating the important contribution of people working and playing in all sorts of spheres, rather than an eclecticism-centric preoccupation with the church worship plan.

I especially appreciated three themes of the book—the need for incarnational local neighbourhood commitment, the importance of incarnational global engagement, and the place of an incarnational relational approach to training and forming missional leaders.

In local mission, there is plenty that distracts from an embodied incarnational engagement with our local neighbourhoods. Christians often move rather than stay, travel for adventure rather than savour local tastes and relationships, see church as an escape from the world rather than a place to be equipped to relate faith to work and everyday life, and do Bible studies during lunch at work about how to share your faith rather than spend time with work colleagues! Frost questions the status quo and appeals for disciples to really follow Jesus in being incarnate and engaging locally, staying rooted, practising solidarity, listening and collaborating with neighbours, and sharing meals and shelter (Luke 10 style).

In global mission, the tendency to be incarnate is exacerbated. Frost questions online activism (or “slacktivism”) that encourages people to “click” to protest about child soldiers or sex trafficking, without necessarily pursuing further advocacy. Short-term mission trips (or “vacationals”) are more involved, and more expensive, than a mouse-click, but they similarly make people feel like they are doing good but often do little to empower locals, foster inter-cultural understanding or relieve poverty, especially at its worst in some forms of orphanage tourism. Acknowledging a positive impulse, Frost prophetically warns against non-incarnational laziness:

“Orphanage visits or click activism is all we do, we have given in to the inexorable drift toward excommunication, when what the world so desperately needs are incarnational servants of Christ to wade into the muck and stench of this world and to partner with the locals, as we have been called in helping to shape human society as God intended it to be.”

As well as being a local practitioner grounded in his local neighbourhood and church, and a missional author of several books, Frost is Vice-Principal and lecturer in evangelism at Morling College. So it is no surprise that incarnate details implications of an incarnational relational approach for forming missional leaders. Like Shadrack’s apprentices learned to make beautifully crafted violins, disciples need, as Michael Polanyi suggests, to get at Jesus’ allow and learn the practical and practices of the master. Frost appeals for orthopraxy not just orthodox, right practice not just right beliefs, and he goes beyond James Smith’s teaching that worship shapes right desires and urges missional action and habits. He discusses the importance of reflective practice and lifelong learning, systemic leadership and non-anxious presence as a tool for congregational transformation, and learning that informs and shapes mission rather than study for study’s sake.

Incarnate is a thought-provoking analysis of the incarnate nature of contemporary society and church life, together with a prescription for a more down-to-earth incarnational approach for engaging local and global needs and everyday life, for forming missional leaders and by extension for theological education.