

The Authentic Christian and the Incarnation

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The Authentic Christian

1 John 1:1-4

How many of you like movies about con artists? You know, some of my favorite movies of all time are about a giant con. For example, I really enjoyed *Ocean's 11* with its all-star cast of George Clooney, Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts, and Matt Damon.

As a child, I thoroughly enjoyed *The Sting* with Paul Newman and Robert Redford. How many of you saw and enjoyed the movie, *Catch Me if You Can*, in which Leonardo DiCaprio pulls off this extraordinary con. He works as a doctor, a lawyer, a pilot for a major airline – all before he was 18 years old. He was also a brilliant forger and at the age of 17 became the most successful bank robber in the history of the United States.

Today I want to begin with an absolutely true, real life con story. Two brothers, I don't have a picture of them, but believe they look like these two guys:

Dumb and Dumber photo

These two brothers were living in Catalonia in Spain when they bought a painting for 27,000 Euros that was supposedly by the famous Spanish artist, Goya.

The painting had a certificate of authenticity, but it turned out to be a fake. The court awarded the fake painting to the brothers for the price of their deposit which was 20,000 Euros.

Ten years later, these two geniuses decided they would try to recoup their 20,000 Euro investment and make money off of this fake Goya by selling the fake as an original. They were approached by an Italian middle man. Let's just picture him as this guy:

Al Pacino picture

And the Italian middle man says that he knows some Arab Sheikh

Picture from Aladdin

Will buy the painting for four million Euros! He said, "All you guys need to do is pay me 300,000 Euros to broker the deal." So, this is how the deal works:

They go to Italy and collect 1.7 million Swiss Francs as payment from the Sheikh while simultaneously giving 300,000 euros to the Italian middle man. Guess what happens? The Sheikh and the middle man take off. When the brothers try to deposit the Swiss Francs in the bank, it turns out the bills were counterfeited, they had been photocopied. The brothers were arrested for attempted fraud and counterfeiting.

Today, I'm going to start a new series from the book of 1 John in the New Testament. I'm titling the series, "The Authentic Christian" because throughout the book, John who is the author, returns again and again to the theme – how can you know that you are a real deal Christian and not a fraud, not a counterfeit, not a fake. How many people claim to be Christian?

"Yes, I'm a Christian. I carry a big Bible around. I'm a Christian. I show up at church on Christmas and Easter. I'm a Christian. I have Christian vocabulary and I throw Christian words around. I was baptized. I take communion. I'm in a small group. Of course, I virtually never give to the poor. I almost never forgive anyone when they hurt me. My basic approach to life is that I have the right to be happy. My beliefs about God are a hodgepodge of things that I've heard in church mixed with things that I got from watching "Touched by an Angel" and reading *The Secret*. I'm a Christian."

So, here's the question. How do you know if you're an authentic Christian? How do you know if someone else, maybe someone you're thinking of dating or someone you're thinking of marrying or going into business with or forming a partnership with, how do you know if they are authentic Christians? What are the qualities that you should find in an authentic Christian? What are the activities that you should observe in someone's life if they are authentic Christians? What are the beliefs that a person should hold if they are an authentic Christian?

1 John says that being an authentic Christian is not just a mystery where you throw up your hands and say, "Gosh, nobody can tell. You can't really know. Maybe we need to hire an expert to detect authentic Christianity." John says that you can know. You, ordinary Christian, you can know. You can tell the real thing from a con job.

Today, as I begin this series from 1 John 1, I'm calling this talk "The Authentic Christian and the Incarnation". Let's pray

1 John 1:1-4

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴ We write this to make our joy complete.

Let me give you a little bit of background about this letter, 1 John. Scholars generally believe that 1 John was written by the same writer of the gospel of John and that it was almost certainly written after the gospel of John. Many scholars would date the gospel of John in the late 80's of the first century. And they would date 1, 2 and 3 John as sometime after that, maybe in the early 90's of the first century.

Now, 1 John wasn't written to a specific church like Paul's letter to the Romans or Paul's letter to the Galatians or the Corinthians. 1 John is more like the book of Hebrews. It was probably a group letter written to a number of different churches that were all facing the same issue. So, what was the issue that these churches were facing that John needed to deal with? The issue, very simply, was the denial of the incarnation.

The denial of the incarnation

You see, in these churches that John wrote to, there was the growth of one of the earliest heresies to hit Christianity. The heresy is called Docetism

Docetism is derived from a Greek word,

Dokein = To seem or appear

The basic idea of Docetism is that Jesus Christ only seemed to be flesh and blood, fully human person. He looked like a man, but he really was pure Spirit. You can see that John is battling this heresy in verses like:

1 John 4:2-3

² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

2 John 7

I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Docetism was an early form of another heresy which was called Gnosticism.

There are lots of aspects to Gnosticism, but the basic idea of Gnosticism is that matter is evil and spirit is good. So, the Gnostics considered the human body to be evil and salvation was an escape from the evil body where we could be pure spirit. Because the Docetics were Gnostics, they couldn't imagine that God would send a savior in a material body because the body is evil. So they said, "Well, Jesus only looked like a flesh

and blood human. He only appeared to be flesh and blood, but he actually was pure spirit otherwise he couldn't have accomplished salvation."

But for now, it's important to understand that John wrote this letter to combat this early church heresy called Docetism which denied the incarnation of Christ.

What do we mean by the incarnation?

The meaning of the incarnation

I'm giving you a lot of theology today. But John tells us in this letter that one way you can tell an authentic Christian is that they believe true things about Jesus Christ. So, you've got to have a certain amount of theology which means "God talk" – truths about God in your mind for you to know that you're an authentic Christian. And someone else needs to believe certain truths about Jesus Christ for us to know that they are authentic Christians. If you deny these truths, then we cannot know that you're an authentic Christian. You may be a con, a fake, whatever you profess about yourself.

Incarnation is a word that every Christian ought to understand. What does it mean?
Incarnate comes from the Latin

In Carne = in flesh

John writes in 1 John 1:

1 John 1:1-2

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ² The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

He says, "That which was from the beginning". He's talking about the Word of Life or what he wrote earlier at the beginning of the gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word". John tells us here in 1 John that the Word of Life from the beginning. He tells us it was from all eternity. The Word of Life was with the Father in close personal relationship. John is talking about the pre-incarnate Christ. From the beginning with the Father, from all eternity – but this pre-incarnate Christ became incarnate (enfleshed) – and John says we, his disciples, his followers, had an eyewitness experience of him. Jesus wasn't just a ghost. He didn't just appear to be in flesh. John says that our experience of this life was a sensory experience. All of the disciples' senses were employed in experiencing Christ.

Look at the senses that John mentions. In verse 1:

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

Then John goes on and says.

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

We didn't just have a vision of him. It wasn't with the eyes of our hearts. Rather, it was with this physical organ we call the eye. We saw this Word in flesh. But John wants to make it really clear that we're talking about a real flesh and blood person in Jesus Christ when he goes on and says,

1 John 1:1

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

We felt him. He wasn't a ghost. We saw him. We heard him. We touched him. We grabbed him. John is promoting this in-fleshing, this embodied, this real life flesh and blood Jesus over against the Docetics. We need to hear this message today. Brothers and sisters, throughout the history of the church, the church by and large has slid over into the Docetic error. Throughout history, the church has exalted Jesus and called him God, which he is. But he has been portrayed and understood as being so far removed from this world that he doesn't seem fully human.

Think of the medieval portraits of Christ.

Indeed, I would say that in the Bible believing brand of Christianity that we would subscribe to here at Vineyard Columbus, Christians of our stripe are so used to defending the deity of Christ against attacks from groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, but also liberal attacks. We're so used to defending the deity of Christ that many of us lost a grasp upon Christ's full humanity. We view Christ as being way up there, but not one of us.

But Christians claim that in Jesus Christ God finally, permanently, and unrepeatably took on human flesh. There is nothing like the incarnation in any other religion – God became a man, one time, at one definite point in history.

Now, what are the implications of the incarnation?

The implications of the incarnation

What difference does it make? If God became a flesh and blood man, if divinity forever took on human flesh – by the way, that’s what Orthodox Christians believe – that the incarnation is eternal. The Son of God did not get rid of his humanity when Jesus ascended into heaven. Humanity was taken up into the Godhead so that forever God the Son is united to human flesh. What difference does it make?

Americans are practical people. In general, Americans don’t like a lot of theory and philosophy. What’s the cash value, Pastor Rich, of the incarnation for us? Why would believing in the incarnation – really laying hold of this idea that God became a flesh and blood man – why would that help our lives today? Let me suggest three differences that laying hold of the incarnation makes for your life today.

The first is

The difference the incarnation makes for our work

How does a denial of the incarnation, impact our work? Well, throughout the history of the church, the denial of the incarnation, or at least a failure to grasp the implications of the incarnation resulted in the church drawing a sharp line between sacred occupations and secular occupations – the old Spirit = good physical material = bad heresy in new garb.

In the Middle Ages the church taught that marriage was permissible, but celibacy was more spiritual. Possessions are permissible, but getting rid of all your possessions is really the ideal. It is OK to hold a 9-5 job, but it is better to be priest or monk who spends all day long in contemplation of God. Normal ordinary secular life is OK, but if you want to live God’s highest, then you need to go into a spiritual profession and become a full-time Christian worker.

This secular vs. spiritual has so infected Christian thinking that it makes many of us feel like what most of what we do with our lives is completely irrelevant to God’s kingdom. You might say, “I spend my whole life basically cleaning up after my kids, being a mom, shopping for food, preparing meals, driving, going to soccer games.” I spend my life ordering medical tests, checking people’s blood pressure, processing insurance claims, working in a government office. How could that possibly compare with preaching the gospel or praying for a sick person, or going to seminary, or being a missionary?

Do you know what the Protestant Reformation was all about? We’re about to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of the Protestant Reformation was all about breaking down this divide between the secular and the spiritual. It was all about recovering the view that we’re all full-time Christians, not just the priest who is handing out the

communion wafer, but the person who is taking communion. Not just the monk who is spending his day in contemplation, but the person who grows the monk's food and cleans his rooms. Christianity teaches that God's kingdom comes as we serve other people through any legitimate work; as we show God's kindness, God's patience, God's character to those we work with; as we improve our little corners of the world, we garden, we clean up our leaves so they don't blow onto our neighbor's yard, we're engaged in God's agenda. The Protestant Reformation was all about restoring the goodness of everyday work.

The incarnation means that all genuinely human tasks that serve someone else, that improve this world in some way for the sake of Christ, or keep it from falling apart, all genuinely human tasks are equally God-given and equally spiritual, they all bring God's rule and reign, his kingdom into this world.

Do you believe this? Do you believe that you are involved in God's work when you load the dishwasher as much as you are involved in God's work when you pray? Or do you say, "Well, God's work is church and Bible study and healing the sick and sharing my faith. Whereas, 99% of what I spend my life on, earning a living in order to provide for myself or provide for my loved ones." Think on things that unless they are scenes from the Bible, teaching kids unless I'm teaching them scripture, playing music unless I'm playing worship songs. But teaching a kid math, playing beautiful music on the piano, expressing something true and beautiful in a painting that may not be a painting from the Bible, all of that is God's work as much as religious things are God's work! Do you believe that? Do you live in that reality and find meaning in what you do because it's part of being fully human. God honored our full humanity by being incarnate.

What difference does the incarnation make? If you really understand that God became a man, that he took on flesh, it will affect not only your view of work but your view of the church.

The difference the incarnation makes for our view of the church

1 John 1:3

³ We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

What John is saying is that Christianity is not just vertical. Well, to be a Christian is to have fellowship with God – to be in relationship with God – I have this vertical relationship with God. Therefore, I am an authentic Christian. John says that you're not an authentic Christian unless you have fellowship, are in relationship with God's people, the church. You see, fellowship needs to be embodied. Otherwise, it's unreal. It's inauthentic. It's like saying, "You know, I love the poor. I just don't like that disheveled

homeless guy being anywhere near me. And, certainly, I'm not going to offer to buy him real food. I'll just walk on the other side of the street and mutter a prayer for him."

"I love Jesus. I just hate his church." Have you ever heard anyone say that? Maybe you've said something like that. So many things did I read on social media today basically boil down to this: Jesus I love, but the church I hate! So much of the Twittersverse, at least in the Christian Twittersverse, is filled with former evangelical people who have been burned by the church who are going through a kind of public recovery by constantly beating up on other Christians and on the church in general while professing true love for Jesus. "Yes, I'm into Jesus. He's wonderful. He's inclusive. He's welcoming. He's loving. The church – not so much. The church is full of hypocrites. The church is judgmental. The church is hurtful."

Can you be an authentic Christian and steer clear of the church?

That is a Docetic view of Christianity. The church is Christ's body in the world. Where is the Spirit of Christ in the world today? When we talk about the Holy Spirit as we did last weekend at the Light the Fire conference, where is the Holy Spirit today? He's not just a ghost floating around in heaven. The Spirit is embodied in the church. The Spirit is enfleshed in the church. Jesus Christ ascended to heaven. Jesus Christ is right now sitting at the right hand of God. From the right hand of God, he sent the Holy Spirit into the world. And the flesh and blood embodiment of the Spirit in the world is the church.

Here's what we read in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 12:27

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

So when we say, "Why doesn't God do something about whatever? You know, why doesn't God do something about the appalling rates of abortion in America? Or the horrible gun violence that we experience in America exponentially greater than anywhere in the Western world." We've just gone through the Las Vegas massacre. Do you know that in the last 14 months in the United States, there have been 521 mass shootings? More than one mass shooting a day involving at least four people being shot. We say, "Why doesn't God do something about this?" Or we see a news report on the world news that there is mass starvation in Venezuela. The average Venezuelan has lost 19 pounds in the last year from massive food shortages. Thousands of Venezuelan children are literally starving to death. It's happening in this hemisphere, not far from the United States. We say, "Come on, God, get to work! Feed hungry people in Venezuela."

What does the Lord say? The Lord says, "You get to work. You, the church, are my body in this world. You are my mouthpiece in this world. You speak up for those who have

no voice. You use your hands, your feet, the money I've given you, and you do something about the food that you're praying for."

Vineyard Columbus understands this that we are the body of Christ. You know that at our 30th anniversary celebration, we took up a special offering. You gave over \$134,000 to hurricane relief efforts and to Venezuela. We already sent five relief teams down to Houston. We just discovered a few days ago that because of FEMA disaster relief regulations and insurance companies' concern about volunteer help and all the rest, we won't be able to send all the teams to Houston as we planned. I apologize to the more than 200 of you who signed up to participate on a work team. We have already sent five or six teams down and we'll send more down over the next few weeks. But it looks like – in light of what we are learning we need to direct most of our money to send food and medical supplies to Venezuela. And we plan to direct some of the money you gave to the incredibly hard hit island of Puerto Rico.

To believe in the incarnation is to value the church, which is the body of Christ. What difference does it make if you believe that God came in a little flesh and blood body? What difference does your faith in the incarnation make? It makes a difference in the view of your work. It makes a difference in your view of the church. And last of all,

The difference the incarnation makes for our relationship with Jesus

You see, authentic Christians don't simply claim that Jesus is God. Authentic Christians claim that God came in the flesh. It is because God came in the flesh that the Christian God can sympathize with men, women and children in a way no other god, no other lord, no other deity in any other religion can sympathize. Authentic Christians say what no one else in the world can claim – that our God did not stay in the safe confines of heaven, remote from human pain or human weakness – instead our God entered this world and took on himself our nature. He lived a life like ours. He endured our temptations. Jesus was altogether sinless. He never violated the will of God. He never broke any of God's laws. He never lied. He was never guilty of sexual immorality. He never gossiped. He never failed to trust God. At no time did he steal. At no time did he envy. He was altogether pure in thought and motive and deed. He obeyed the scriptures perfectly.

But he was human, which means that he really did have to learn his math tables the way we do as children. I can imagine his mother, Mary, saying, "No, Jesus, it's not $5 \times 5 = 30$, it's $5 \times 5 = 25$." Or when Jesus was cutting boards in his father's carpenter shop, do you think that he ever cut a board that was just a little too short? Or made a mistake or hit his thumb with the hammer? Of course he did! Did his thumb hurt when he hit it? Yes! When he learned to read, as every Jewish boy learned to read, do you think he ever mispronounced Hebrew words as he was sounding them out? Of course, he struggled as he learned to read.

Gerald Hawthorne, a New Testament scholar, said,

In becoming a man the Son of God willed to renounce the exercise of his divine powers, attributes and prerogatives, so that he might live fully within those limitations which inhere in being truly human.

In other words, Jesus wasn't fake learning. He learned the way we learn by asking questions and making mistakes. Jesus had a true physical body so that when he got hungry his stomach growled. When he got thirsty, his mouth was dry. When he was tired, he had to stop and catch his breath and wipe his brow. And while we cannot be dogmatic about whether Jesus got sick because the New Testament is silent on this point, the best New Testament scholars other than prosperity teachers say that there is absolutely nothing in the New Testament portrayal of Jesus that would keep us from believing that he, indeed, got sick just like every other human being who ever lived.

Jesus was fully human. When he fell as a child, he cut his knee and it could have gotten infected. If he drank dirty water, he would have been sick. I find this incredibly encouraging. Friend, when you are nauseated from pregnancy or from cancer treatments or from food poisoning, and you're hanging your head over a toilet and vomiting up your guts – I don't know about you, but when I'm in that state I wish I was dead and I'm saying in my mind "God, kill me now". I believe that we can also say, "God, you understand exactly how I feel because experienced this. You threw up. Thank you for drawing so near to me and not remaining up in heaven. I'm touched by everything that I've experienced."

During his teenage years, New Testament scholars say that Jesus probably had pimples and body odor and bad breath. The God man went through puberty. His voice changed. Girls probably had crushes on him. Boys may have teased him. There were probably some foods that he didn't like. Could he sing? Maybe he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket. Maybe he sounded like me when I sing. Maybe Jesus had no sense of rhythm.

You know, some people think it's irreverent to speak of Jesus this way. Listen to what Max Lucado, the famous Christian writer and pastor, said,

Slide

It's not something we like to do, it's uncomfortable. It's much easier to keep the humanity out of the incarnation. Clean the manure from around the manger. Wipe the sweat out of his eyes. Pretend he never snored or blew his nose or hit his thumb with a hammer. He's easier to stomach that way. There is something about keeping him divine that keeps him distant, packaged, predictable. But don't do it. For Heaven's sakes, don't do it. Let him be as human as he intended to be. Let him into the mire and muck of our world. For only if we let him in can he pull us out!

Only if Jesus was fully human can he save us, rescue us, and be our substitute and sacrifice.

Let's pray.