



Advent 2007

Dear listener,

In the past few decades, it has become increasingly common for churches to rely on marketing data to determine the shape of their ministry. It is widely accepted that the Church is like any other provider of a commodity—that the desires, expectations, and assumptions of its potential “customers” or “clients” must be honored. In preparing to celebrate Advent this year, I have been inspired by this model of ministry to imagine what might have happened if God had relied on market research to tailor the form of his ministry to mankind. Given the religious and philosophical assumptions in the world 2,000 years ago, I think it’s safe to assume that consumer-defined salvation would not have involved the Incarnation. At best, we might have gotten something like Good Friday, but certainly no Christmas, and maybe no Easter.

As St. Paul observed in his visit to Athens, the world of his day included many religions, many schemes and strategies to implore deities for mercy and favor. The idea of the necessity of salvation for human beings was not as implausible then as it is for us now. Israel understood the need for salvation, the need for forgiveness in light of human sin. The descendants of Abraham believed in the coming of Messiah, but most likely the idea that their God would enter human history as a human being was not widely entertained, in spite of the fact that one of God’s appellations was *Immanuel*: “God with us.”

The Greco-Roman world believed in something like the Logos, but the idea that the Logos would be made flesh was repugnant (which is one reason why the apostle John is so emphatic about this reality in the prologue to his gospel). The idea that the Being above all being would become a baby in need of care was metaphysically incorrect. The Greco-Roman mind could not imagine that (in the words of theologian Michael Williams): “The power that called the world into being [could take] on the weakness of creatureliness. Contrary to the universality and changelessness sought by the philosophies of Greece, John declares that meaning and truth are to be found in historical particularity, a specific historical person: Jesus of Nazareth, the Word become flesh. The scandal of the Christian faith is that God became flesh in Jesus Christ.”

If God had been looking for a way to establish a plausible, immediately recognizable religious brand in the region around the Mediterranean 2,000 years ago—a product that would meet the felt needs of the residents of Syria, Asia, Macedonia, and Italy of that period—it would certainly not have involved something as humble as the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.

A religious program modelled after natural human expectations may have included something like the cross. It may have included a desire to be right with God, to be delivered from death and judgment and anxiety and strife. Even a “consumer-driven” religion might well require a Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. But in God’s own redemptive plan, the Lamb of God is also the Son of Man. The cross which accomplishes our salvation is bracketed by a manger and an empty tomb, which define

the shape of our redemption as something with human, earthly consequences. More than just a logical precondition for the Atonement, the Incarnation also establishes the trajectory for our new life as a truly *human* life. There is a theological link between confidence in the full humanity of Jesus and a recognition of the ramifications of our salvation across the full range of our own humanity, across all of the ways in which we engage God's creation.

Much of modern culture, with its Gnostic undertones, alienates us from creation and its givenness. Theologian Colin Gunton sees the affirmation of the Incarnation as essential to our enthusiastic participation in creation and therefore in cultural life. "A world that owes its origin to a God who makes it with direct reference to one who was to become incarnate—part of that world—is a world that is a proper place for human beings to use their senses, minds and imaginations, and to expect that they will not be wholly deceived in doing so."

Christians have the only account of human and natural origins that can give cultural life meaning. But even after 2,000 years of opportunity to reflect on the Incarnation, many contemporary Christians persist in believing in a Gnostic salvation, a salvation that has no cultural consequences. In such a dualistic understanding, our souls are saved, the essential immaterial aspect of our being is made right with God, but the actions of our bodies—what we actually do in space and time—are a matter of indifference if not futility. Salvation is an inward matter only. It affects our attitudes and some of our ideas. But insofar as our cultural activities have any Christian significance it is as mere marketing efforts—things we do to attract others to our essentially Gnostic salvation.

Believing in a gospel that has few earthly consequences is, ironically, just the sort of state our secularist neighbors would wish us to sustain. They, too, are dualists, believing that religion may be a fine thing for people, so long as they keep it private. Their secularism isn't threatened by Christians as long as they aren't too "Incarnational." As long as the cultural lives of Christians aren't significantly different from those of materialists and pagans, secularism is safe. Christians may pray "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," but as long as they don't actually do anything that demonstrates how such a petition should affect their political, economic, and cultural activities, the Enlightenment legacy is safe.

A hearty appreciation of the meaning of the Incarnation could deliver us from serving the interests of secularists. In his recent book *Far as the Curse is Found*, Michael Williams writes that in his gospel, "John does not conceive of Christ as a Gnostic heavenly Savior who comes from heaven to bring souls trapped in the world back to their home above. Rather, Jesus comes to bring his people eternal life on earth, a life that will mean the resurrection of the body at the last day." Later in his book, Williams argues that the Incarnation is evidence that in saving his people, God does not thereby abandon his creation. "By participating in our reality, the Man from heaven affirms the goodness of creaturely life, the redeemability of creation and creaturely existence. The gospel is not the fracture of heaven and earth but the wedding of the two, embodied as they both are in the incarnation of the one who is *vere Deus* ('fully divine') and *vere Homo* ('fully human'). In the incarnation God declared his intentions not only for humanity but also for all creation. The creation is as much an object of the sovereign love and redemption of God as is the soul of man."

What we call “culture” is the way we interact with the order of creation. A society that, by its institutions, encourages people to observe an order in the structure of time has a very different take on creation than a culture that encourages a “24/7” denial of such an order. A society can guard its laws and traditions concerning marriage and the family so as to reflect an order in the nature of sexuality, fidelity, and sacrificial love. Or a society can promote practices and institutions that advance individual human sovereignty and deny any order that might guide the ways we choose to form relationships. A society that has no use for ritual or poetry implicitly denies the meaningfulness of forms and the interconnectedness of things in a created web of similes and metaphors and figures, whereas a society that encourages poetic imagination tacitly affirms an order in Creation that links spirit and matter. The pattern of cultural forms in every society reflects a view of Creation; no cultural order is somehow neutral or theologically indifferent.

Christians who regard cultural forms with indifference so long as the gospel is conveyed to people seem to be neglecting the way the Incarnation defines the gospel. If the Incarnation is the wedding of heaven and earth, then the gospel is as much about creation as redemption. The gospel is the story of redemption of created things (including us) and thus how we order our life within creation is not a concern separable from the communication of the gospel. “Man’s life on earth is important to God,” writes moral philosopher Oliver O’Donovan. “[H]e has given it its order; it matters that it should conform to the order he has given it. Once we have grasped that, we can understand too how this order requires of us both a denial of all that threatens to become disordered and a progress towards a life which goes beyond this order without negating it.” This denial and progress are at the core of Christian ethics and hence of Christian discipleship. When Christ calls the Church to go into the world and make disciples, he does so as the one who has authority over all things in heaven and on earth, the one who established, entered, and then rescued creation in its order. Preaching of the gospel that ignores this magnificent reality is, I suggest, missing the whole point.

Our lives are meant to be lived within a certain kind of order, and therefore we should resist the tendencies toward disorder. This view of discipleship has profound cultural consequences. It means that we are obligated to learn to be more aware of that order and to resist cultural fashions that deviate from it. If, for example, the order God placed in Creation involves interaction and harmony between generations, then the disruptive generational apartheid advanced by contemporary popular culture is something the Church should repudiate, in word and deed.

I began this letter by suggesting that a religion shaped by popular opinion would not have involved the Incarnation. Similarly, religious practices shaped by raw consumer preference are unlikely to resist disordered cultural fashions. As long as people assume that religion is a matter of cleaning up their inner lives, of changing only their hearts, they will choose forms of religion that fit the cultural conventions with which they are at home. As long as they are essentially dualists, as long as they think of religion as something detached from their humanity in all of its details, the claim that some cultural forms honor the order of God’s Creation better than others will remain implausible to them. Unless the Church bears witness to this idea, unless the Church takes cultural life seriously enough to be willing to make distinctions between healthy and unhealthy cultural forms, neither seekers nor disciples are likely to get beyond their dualism.

I launched the work of **MARS HILL AUDIO** over fifteen years ago in an effort to encourage Christians to attend more closely to the meaning of cultural changes in

American society, and to the history of the culture in which we are striving to be faithful. I did this at a time when the idea of “market-driven” churches was becoming more and more popular, an idea that seemed wrong to me in many ways. (After all, the whole point of being a shepherd is that sometimes sheep want to wander off and graze in dangerous places.) The result of this movement was that many congregations and individuals were adopting cultural fashions carelessly. This mimicry was nothing really new; American churches have often been very American, sometimes more American than Christian. What was new was the extent to which the emerging cultural conventions were shaped by an unprecedented level of suspicion about authority (that is, about the very idea of an order in the nature of things) and by a confidence in the sovereignty of the individual—cultural orientations which were deeply at odds with fundamental Christian beliefs. This seemed to be an odd time to conform the life of the Church more closely to the surrounding culture.

Producing materials in a company that challenges many popular assumptions is, well, challenging. It means finding an audience in secluded places rather than where crowds gather. So we practice product- and purpose-driven marketing, rather than developing market-driven products. In the past year, we’ve stepped up our efforts to build our audience and we hope to increase that momentum in the coming year. I’ve been extremely heartened by the generosity our subscribers have shown in raising the level of their giving, and hope that you can continue to be as generous while we continue to work toward finding new customers and new forms of serving them in ways that will advance our goal of encouraging cultural discernment.

In addition to your prayers, financial contributions, and deeply encouraging letters and notes, you can help us by continuing to spread the word about our work. Spread the word to friends and family members, pastors, teachers, students—anyone you know who is interested in stretching their thinking about how our present cultural preoccupations took shape, how they compare with a Christian account of human well-being, and how the Church might be faithful to its counter-cultural calling. And please consider giving a gift subscription to someone. We’re hoping in the coming year to market our work more aggressively to undergraduate and graduate students. They are in a unique position of having time to think about the significance of Christ’s person and work in cultural life, but unfortunately, many student ministries have devolved into “youth ministries.” Afraid of alienating a generation more shaped by popular culture than any in history, many involved in student ministries are capitulating to an anti-intellectual and therapeutic approach which simply furthers the cultural captivity of these students. We’d like to offer thousands of Christian students a gateway into a world of reading and thinking about all aspects of our cultural experience that will encourage a living faithfulness rather than a dull dualism.

Once again, thanks for your continued support, and may God bless you with a rich appropriation of the marvels commemorated in this season.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Myers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ken Myers
Host and Producer