

# Chaplaincy: Incarnation in Action

---

*Robert Hubbard, emeritus professor of Old Testament,  
North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois*

I mark the launch of my ministry as a Navy chaplain to a brief moment on June 15, 1970, at the Los Angeles Armed Forces Induction Center. Within two hours I would receive my commission, brand-new green identification card, and orders to report to Newport, Rhode Island, two weeks later. But at the moment I stood in my undershorts in a line of about twenty young men, all of us undergoing the medical exam to confirm that we were physically qualified for service. As we turned to move on to the next station, the short, skinny eighteen-year-old next to me, obviously anxious and confused, blurted nervously, “Hey, what are we doing now?” I leaned toward him and replied softly, “Don’t worry; just follow me.” In that moment I briefly glimpsed the military ministry ahead of me: as a minister of the gospel, my calling was to point women and men, some confused and anxious, to find the right direction for their lives and futures. On that day, I signed on for three years of active duty and six years in the Naval Reserve, but under God’s good hand I was privileged to serve four years active duty and twenty-six in the Reserve. It was a special privilege to have one ministry foot in the academy and the other in the military.

In this essay, I explore the chaplaincy ministry as I know it through the lenses of biblical theology and my own experience as a chaplain. I will argue that the theology of incarnation offers a useful model for understanding exactly what a chaplain does—and why. The model of incarnational ministry has guided me in both of my ministry fields, but I’m probably more aware of its influence when I’m wearing my chaplain hat rather than my professor mortarboard.

## **What Makes Chaplaincy Unique?**

How does a chaplain differ from a pastor? In my view, a unique ministry setting distinguishes the chaplain from pastor. The pastor's primary setting is the local congregation—Covenant Church X, located in Y-city in Z-state. That congregation comprises a spiritual flock that the pastor shepherds in their walk with Christ and in whatever service they render their local community. Members of the flock share in common an ongoing relationship with Jesus and an agreed-upon basic set of Christian beliefs—the Apostles' Creed and the six Covenant Affirmations, for example. A chaplain's ministry setting, by contrast, is not a local congregation but an institution—a military unit, a police force, a jail or prison, a hospital, a hospice unit, a retirement village, or a college or university. Both the staff of these institutions and the public they serve are more ethnically and religiously diverse and geographically larger than the local church flock. They may share neither an ongoing relationship with God nor a set of religious beliefs, but there are often practicing Christians who work in such "secular" arenas. Some institutions may belong to specific religious denominations (e.g., hospitals, universities, retirement villages), but many belong to secular bodies like cities, towns, counties, states, or countries (e.g., police units, prisons, hospitals, universities, the military). They are not necessarily *anti*-religious (though I've occasionally encountered individuals, even some leaders, who are); it's just that their staff and their clients represent the religious pluralism of the general public more so than a local Christian congregation. In reality, their hopes, dreams, and fears are not much different from those of the average Christian congregation. But their means of managing them may differ from the approach of the latter. In short, the world of most chaplains is a secular, very diverse one. The chaplain's unique challenge is how to pastor (in the best sense of that word) individuals who span the spectrum of beliefs and non-beliefs.

## **To What Critical Problem Does the Incarnation Respond?**

What is the critical problem that the theme of incarnation, so central in the Bible, solves? In my view, nothing captures the communication strategy of the incarnation better than two well-known biblical worship locations: the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the Temple in Jerusalem. As is well known, the central structure of both has two parts, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. The latter is the specific place where Yahweh was thought to reside personally; it was the location of the Ark

of the Covenant, Israel's most sacred object and the "throne" on which Yahweh invisibly "sat" as Israel's ultimate ruler. Around each of these structures spread either the tents of Israel's temporary desert encampment (the Tabernacle) or the permanent buildings and houses of Jerusalem. For my purposes, what is striking is that Yahweh chose to live right in the middle of his people; God chose not just to be "with" them (i.e., their supporter or advocate) but to "live among them" (i.e., a fellow resident in a camp or city). Theologically, God's choice presumes the divine desire for proximity to people rather than distance from them, a proximity that facilitates their access to God's presence and their receipt of God's blessings. God's expulsion of the first humans from the garden of Eden imposed an impassable distance between them and their Creator (Genesis 3:23–24), but the Tabernacle and Temple located God nearby and made God's presence accessible to their descendants.

But there's a rub. According to the Torah, that accessibility is highly regulated. The average Israelite could not simply stroll into the Most Holy Place of either worship structure whenever he or she wished. Only the high priest was allowed to enter there—and only once a year during the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:29–34; Hebrews 9:7). The closest an ordinary Israelite could get to the Holy of Holies was to the Burned Offering Altar that stood in the open space in front of the Tabernacle or Temple. Only priests had ongoing access to the Holy Place (but not the Most Holy Place), so while God and Israel lived as near neighbors, God still lived in a gated-community with highly regulated access. The set-up isn't exactly a return to God and humans "walking [together] in the cool of the day" back in Eden (Genesis 3:8), but it was at least a step in that direction. Let us remember, however, that that limited accessibility served a positive purpose: it aimed to protect worshipers from certain death, the fate the unfortunate Uzzah sadly met when he touched the Ark (2 Samuel 6:6–7). This protection was necessary because of qualitatively different natures of God and people: God is holy but people are unholy, and unregulated meetings of holy and unholy beings set off disastrous fireworks, as Uzzah's case confirms.

To illustrate the point, a few miles north of the Marine Corps Base at Camp Pendleton, California, the large, forbidding San Onofre Nuclear Generating Station stands between the interstate and the shoreline. High, barbed-wire fences surround the site, with a guarded front gate its only access. Blinking red lights and giant warning signs proclaim the catastrophe that awaits any intrusion inside the reactor building. The restricted

access serves to protect would-be visitors from sudden death. The same protection motive drove the limited access of Tabernacle and Temple in Israel. And my argument is that this mix of proximity and regulated access is precisely the nagging human predicament that the theology of incarnation aims to overcome. Its goal is in the direction of increased proximity and enhanced intimacy.

### **Were There Pre-Christian Divine Incarnations?**

Incarnation is usually thought to be an exclusively New Testament idea, but I suggest that two phenomena in the Old Testament may anticipate it and illuminate a biblical understanding of incarnational ministry. In my view, both represent God's attempts to overcome the human predicament just described and speak volumes about the nature of God and the nature of chaplaincy ministry. The first example is the well-known phenomenon of prophecy. Through prophets God speaks of judgment, hope, or guidance to a human audience. Granted, the phenomenon of prophecy does not transform a human prophet into a divine being in any sense, but it does provide the means through which God's voice is heard through proclamation of God's words. Two rhetorical features of prophecy bear reminder. Typically, a prophet prefaces the message by invoking the customary messenger formula ("Thus says the LORD" or its variations), signaling that what follows are God's very own words.

The prophet also speaks in the first person, thus conveying the message almost as if God himself were present in the moment. I've often imagined the dramatic scenes that played out when Amos indicted the rampant idolatry at Bethel (Amos 5) or Jeremiah preached his "Temple sermon" to Jerusalemites passing through the Temple gate for worship (Jeremiah 7). For my purposes, I hasten to highlight the historical reality that stood behind the rhetoric and that gave their proclamations authority: the prophets were on intimate terms with Yahweh who had commissioned them to convey God's words. Some prophets even overheard or attended the deliberations of the heavenly council about Israel's future (Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 23:17–18). They could thus announce the disasters and rescues decreed for God's people with full authority. In sum, in prophecy God spoke divine words to humans through humans.

But we must also understand that "prophecy avenue" was in fact a two-way street. As God's messengers, the prophets brought word from Yahweh to humans, but they also mediated word from humans to Yahweh. For example, in search of his uncle's lost donkeys, Saul sought the

assistance of Samuel (1 Samuel 9), and the narrator's aside (v. 9) shows that inquiring of God through a "seer" or "prophet" was an established ancient practice. Centuries later, three times Yahweh forbids Jeremiah to intervene on behalf of Judah because the divine mind is made up to destroy Judah (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Yahweh also declares that even the most revered of mediators (i.e., Moses and Samuel) would not avail against God's decision to ravage Judah (Jeremiah 15:1). Thus, the example of Samuel, the prohibitions in Jeremiah, and the mention of fabled mediators confirm that mediation—prayers to God on behalf of humans—also formed part of a prophet's ministry portfolio.

Before proceeding, however, we would do well to understand what distinguishes prophets from priests. According to Jeremiah 18:8, the teaching of Torah is the primary province of the latter, the prophetic word that of the former. In other words, as descendants of Levi priests serve the permanent institution established by Moses to provide Israel instruction exclusively in Moses's teaching and to conduct its worship life. Prophets by contrast mark a more ad-hoc, often non-institutional, avenue for Yahweh to address Israel about current matters of concern. In my view, in today's ecclesiology the ancient priests compare to the pastor and the prophets more to the chaplain, although the analogy is admittedly imperfect.

The second Old Testament incarnation-like phenomenon is the episode in Judges 13, which has long fascinated me. It's an example of a larger group of texts featuring the intriguing figure of "the angel of God/the LORD" who interacts with human beings on God's behalf (e.g., Genesis 16:7–13; 21:17–18; Exodus 23:23; Numbers 22:22–35).<sup>1</sup> Compared to prophets, these messengers act in more strikingly supernatural ways, and their presence strongly implies direct divine presence on site with all the dangers at risk in divine-human contacts (cf. Genesis 32:30; Judges 13:22). This is what fascinates me in Judges 13: the narrative juxtaposes references to "the angel of the LORD" and to a human prophet (called "a man of God") as if they were the same. The story reports how a prophet informed Manoah and his wife, childless at the time, that they would have a son—the famous Samson, as it turns out. The "angel of the LORD" appears first to the wife (vv. 2–5), who describes him to Manoah as "a man of God" who "looked like an angel of God, very awesome" (v. 6, TNIV). Exactly what about the man struck the woman as "very awesome" is not

1. For scholarly discussion of this biblical character, see D.N. Freedman, et al., "*mal'ak*," TDOT 8:317–324.

explained, but her husband prays for God to send “the man of God” back again (v. 8). When “the man” reappears (v. 10), the narrator frames the ensuing dialogue as between “the angel of the LORD” and Manoah (vv. 13–18), inserting an aside that “Manoah did not realize that it was the angel of the LORD” (v. 16b, TNIV).

When Manoah burned a sacrifice to honor the visitor, the “angel” disappeared in the ascending smoke, and Manoah finally recognized the man’s true identity (vv. 20–21). That recognition terrified Manoah: he thought it tantamount to seeing God, an act that doomed the couple to death (v. 22). But his wife reassured him that the sacrifice had been accepted (v. 23), and she later gave birth to Samson (v. 24). In my view, the story implies that the angel of the LORD here appeared in human form—or, at least, that was how the human couple perceived the “angel.” The incarnation strategy apparently intends to introduce God’s presence directly into the lives of the human pair without terrifying them.<sup>2</sup> It implies divine condescension—God’s accommodation to the limitations inherent in the human predicament—in order to advance the larger divine salvation plan.

### **Incarnation in Jesus: The Climactic, Perfect Paradigm**

The climactic, perfect paradigm of incarnation, the event that in my view the above examples anticipate, is of course the incarnation of God in the person of his own Son, Jesus Christ. The Tabernacle and Temple provided humans access to God but under strict regulations that promoted proximity but not the intimacy their ancestors knew in Eden. Through prophecy, humans heard God’s voice, but only indirectly through messengers sent to them by God from elsewhere. In Judges 13, Yahweh’s close associate, the angel of the LORD, masquerades as a human prophet to deliver good news, so Samson’s parents need not fear death for having looked on God. Given this background, how stunning is John’s claim that “[t]he Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14, TNIV). When I quote those familiar words in public I confess that I often choke up with emotion because I know how long and hard the road back to Eden has been for humans; I understand how reticent the

2. As Freedman et al. explain, “The shift between Yahweh and *mal’ak* YHWH does not involve the substitution of an anthropomorphic portrayal of the deity by theological speculation... but rather the living portrayal of an encounter with God, which because of the dangers of an immediate theophany was also understood as having been mediated in some way” (TDOT 8:321).

Old Testament is to place God and humans too close in proximity. What Hebrews 1:1–2 declares is equally stunning: “In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . .” (TNIV).

Invoking language that echoes Old Testament motifs, both statements mark the incarnation as a breath-taking, radical step forward toward improved intimacy with God. Both testify that in Jesus we have actually seen “the glory of God” (John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3), an Old Testament term that describes the aura of visible light or fire that signaled God’s residence in the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34–35) or Temple (1 Kings 8:11). Post-biblical Jewish writers would call that sight the *shekinah*. John’s phrase “made his dwelling” (literally, “spread his tent”) also seems to allude to God’s former residence, the “tent” (i.e., the Tabernacle) that God spread amid Israel in the wilderness. It signals that Jesus’s dwelling in a fleshly “tent” serves the same purpose as the former—to put God and humans in proximity. Both writers thus affirm that God himself was actually personally present in the human Jesus, not just represented at a safe distance by an angel as in Judges 13. Theologically, only Jesus bears the key title of God’s “Son.”

But there’s more. Hebrews 1 ranks the incarnate Son as superior to any prophet when it comes to speaking for God (he speaks *as* God and not *for* God) and to any angel (v. 4) when it comes to representing God to humans (he *presents* rather than *represents* God). Finally, according to 1 John 1:1, in Jesus people have not only “heard” God’s voice, as they did through prophets, or “seen” or even “looked at” God, as did Manoah and his wife in Judges 13; their human hands have also “touched” him. Given the terrible fate of Uzzah noted above, this may be the most astounding claim! In sum, unlike the prophets and the angel/prophet in Judges 13, Jesus is God himself living in human form, and it is that unique distinction that vouches for God’s presence living among humans.

### **What Does the Incarnation Teach Us about Being Chaplains?**

What does the incarnation teach chaplains about their ministry? First, the incarnation reminds us of the nature of our God. Imagine a God who, having created humans and justly expelled them from his presence in Eden, now goes to great lengths to reestablish and maintain contact with them. That’s the God whose desire for relationship with humans drives the provision of Tabernacle and Temple, the sending of prophets and angels, and the sending of God’s own Son, Jesus. That’s the God

who calls chaplains to serve and sends them into a variety of arenas where their ministries daily bridge the yawning gap between God and humans. And, as Paul put it, it is “Christ’s love [that] compels us” to obey and live out that call (2 Corinthians 5:14, TNIV). Second, the incarnation shows us that God specifically tailors the pattern for such contacts. God speaks to humans through humans because, put simply, humans are comfortable with humans because they know what they’re like and speak their language. Third, the incarnation also suggests what effective chaplaincy ministry today might look like. It reminds us to *be out there* where the people are.

I knew a chaplain at one base in Vietnam who would send a welcome letter to everyone who came to serve at that base inviting each one to attend chapel services. It was a kind, courteous gesture that certainly alerted new arrivals to his presence should they need assistance. But my incarnational model led me to pursue a different strategy: wherever I served, I regularly left my chapel office and made the rounds, visiting people around the base—in working spaces, lounges, flight lines, radio shacks, etc. I gladly accepted invitations to ride as a guest on aircraft, small boats, and land vehicles—anything that moved and had people on it. In offices and repair shops I never turned down a cup of coffee, the customary military sign of hospitality, although its quality and flavor varied greatly. In my day, Navy chaplains nicknamed this approach “the ministry of presence,” and I loved it because my presence “out there” often opened up serious conversations with people who wanted to talk but would never have darkened the door of my office. If Jesus willingly left heaven for earth, I thought, I could certainly leave my office to walk and talk among people whom Jesus loved.

Further, the incarnation reminds us that we must be people *living in genuine communion with God*. To represent God to humans (and humans to God, too) we must know God intimately. Through that relationship, cultivated by worship, Scripture, and prayer, our understanding of who God is grows. It’s the only way that we, like angels and prophets, can be on intimate terms with God. The angels knew God from sharing his presence, the prophets through receiving divine messages, and Jesus through communion with his Father. A chaplain’s representing the living God effectively—demonstrating God’s love and mercy, or speaking or acting on God’s behalf—requires an ongoing relationship with our Lord that profoundly shapes our outlook, our attitudes, and our very personhood. Finally, a chaplain’s calling is, like the angels, prophets, and Jesus himself,

to be people who *share the word and offer prayer*. Consistent with the go-between role of the prophet and the example of Jesus, it has been my practice to ask people with whom I'm dealing if they would like me to pray for them. I can't remember ever being turned down, and doing so powerfully draws the object of that prayer toward God, narrowing the gap between God and the person. Also consistent with the incarnational examples explored above, I highly commend the practice of weaving appropriate, carefully chosen Scripture quotations into ministry conversations. Hebrews 4:12 celebrates how powerful and penetrating God's word is, and Jesus invoked it in his defense against Satan's temptations (Matthew 4:1–11). So it makes sense to me to weave Scripture's words into conversations when they relate to the topic or situation at hand. In those moments, one may hear God's own words spoken to them, with the Holy Spirit quietly applying these words to their present need.

### **My Incarnational Ministry**

Through this essay, I commend incarnational ministry as a biblical strategy for ministry today and always. In retrospect, my mind often drifts back to memorable moments in my own practice of incarnational ministry. I recall people whose life-paths have crossed mine during my three decades as a chaplain. I remember Harold,<sup>3</sup> a sailor in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam (1971) whom I visited late one night as he staffed a perimeter guard tower. His commanding officer was concerned that something was troubling Harold, so I went to see him. Harold shared with me his recent, strange experiences of God—dreams, striking coincidences, a heightened sense of awareness. I decided that he wasn't "crazy"—that God, indeed, was doing something in his life, although, in all candor, I didn't know what that was. So, I encouraged Harold to seek God, for God did seem to be seeking him. I prayed for him and left him to God.

I think also of my conversations with Pete, a lieutenant about my age who commanded my home base, the small repair ship anchored in mid-Mekong near the Cambodian border. That ship marked the jumping-off point from which I played "circuit-riding preacher" around the Delta. Pete was a devoted follower of novelist Ayn Rand and got me to read and reply to her well-known novel, *Atlas Shrugged*. In one conversation he listened politely as I told him my story—my relationship with Christ and what it meant to me. Later, after my transfer elsewhere, at

3. All names have been altered.

his request I had a Bible sent to him, and, to my surprise, he wrote that he'd read from Genesis into 2 Kings and hadn't found anything to which he objected! Although we eventually lost touch, I continued to pray for him for many years and wonder what seeds of faith might have grown from that Bible reading.

I also recall the Johnsons who came to my office at the shipyard at Bremerton, Washington. After six years of marriage and two kids, the husband's alcoholism drove them to divorce, but now a few years later the man was "dry" and they wanted to remarry. They were people of Christian faith, and I gladly did the small ceremony after advising them to keep Christ at the center of their marriage. Two months later they were back to see me, and shortly thereafter I baptized their school-age children. Further, I remember Tom, a Navy pilot who took me by car to the Navy airfield near San Diego where that night I was to catch a flight back to my home base near Seattle. After dinner, Tom turned the conversation to religion, asking numerous questions about God and Christian beliefs that I attempted to field. The following Christmas, I received a Christmas card telling me that our conversation had contributed significantly to his becoming a Christian. Today he's a civilian and has for many years had a Christian ministry to military personnel at nearby bases.

Finally, each June 14 my thoughts return to the sudden death of Charlie, my reserve commanding officer, of a heart attack in Denver. At the family's invitation, I conducted the memorial service and in succeeding years visited his widow every few months. I also came to know their children. When we moved to Chicago, she sent a fruit basket to congratulate me on my new position at North Park Theological Seminary, and our move back to Denver last year enabled us to reconnect. All too often, incarnational ministry requires us to walk gently with humans through the valley of the shadow of death and accompany them through their grief.

## **Conclusion**

A story I've heard recalls a dark evening in which a parent was gently tucking a young child in bed for the night. The child was afraid to be alone in the dark—and said so forthrightly.

"Please don't leave me," the child pleaded. "Being alone in the dark scares me. I always imagine that there are angry monsters out there." Gently, the wise parent consoled the frightened child. "Don't be afraid. Remember, if something happens, Mommy and Daddy will be right next door ready to answer your cries for help."

“No, no, no!” the child objected. “Can’t you stay here in the room with me so I’m not alone? Please!”

At this point, the parent drew on some good Christian theology to ease the child’s anxiety. “Now, you know that God is invisible—we can’t see him like we can see people—but God is also everywhere, even right here in this room. So, when you feel afraid, just remember that God is right here with you.”

“No!” the child persisted, “I want somebody here with skin.”

One thing chaplains do is present to people God-with-skin. They are an incarnation of God’s presence and work in the world, visible with human eyes to see, ears to listen, a voice to speak, and hands to touch.