

## From Bethlehem to the Classroom: An Incarnational Paradigm for Christian Early Childhood Education

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**Abstrak**

This article develops an incarnational pedagogical paradigm for Christian early childhood education, grounded in the biblical narrative of the Incarnation as presented in Luke 2:1-20 and John 1:14. Employing a constructive theological method, the study integrates exegetical analysis of the selected biblical texts with contemporary educational theory and developmental psychology to formulate a holistic framework for children aged 0-6. Four interconnected dimensions are proposed: pedagogy as hospitality, curriculum as narrative participation, assessment as gift and growth, and community as the primary site of formation. The study argues that the Incarnation, understood as God's embodied presence in Jesus Christ, fundamentally reorders the logic of Christian education by displacing cognitive-centered and performance-driven models in favor of a framework centered on embodiment, relational presence, and prevenient grace. Children are affirmed as *imago Dei*, possessing intrinsic dignity and spiritual capacity prior to any academic achievement. The study concludes that when incarnational theology fully inhabits educational practice, the Christian classroom becomes a modern Bethlehem, a sacred space where divine love is made concretely real in the lives of young children, and where the church reclaims its formative role in holistic child development.

**Keywords:** incarnational theology; Christian early childhood education; embodied pedagogy; *imago Dei*; spiritual formation

**Abstrak**

Artikel ini mengembangkan paradigma pedagogis inkarnasional untuk pendidikan anak usia dini Kristen, yang berlandaskan pada narasi Alkitab tentang Inkarnasi sebagaimana tertuang dalam Lukas 2:1-20 dan Yohanes 1:14. Dengan menggunakan metode teologi konstruktif, penelitian ini mengintegrasikan analisis eksegesis teks Alkitab yang dipilih dengan teori pendidikan kontemporer dan psikologi perkembangan untuk merumuskan kerangka holistik bagi anak usia 0-6 tahun. Empat dimensi yang saling terhubung diusulkan, yakni pedagogi sebagai keramahtamahan, kurikulum sebagai partisipasi naratif, penilaian sebagai anugerah dan pertumbuhan, serta komunitas sebagai ruang pembentukan utama. Penelitian ini berargumen bahwa Inkarnasi, yang dipahami sebagai kehadiran Allah yang menjelma dalam diri Yesus Kristus, secara fundamental menyusun ulang logika pendidikan Kristen dengan menggeser model yang berpusat pada kognisi dan berorientasi kinerja, menuju kerangka yang berpusat pada penjelmaan, kehadiran relasional, dan anugerah yang mendahului. Anak-anak diteguhkan sebagai *imago Dei*, yang memiliki martabat intrinsik dan kapasitas spiritual sebelum pencapaian akademis apa pun. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa ketika teologi inkarnasional sepenuhnya menghuni praktik pendidikan, ruang kelas Kristen menjadi Betlehem modern, yakni ruang sakral di mana kasih ilahi diwujudkan secara nyata dalam kehidupan anak-anak usia dini, dan di mana gereja kembali mengemban perannya dalam pengembangan anak secara holistik.

**Kata Kunci:** teologi inkarnasional; pendidikan anak usia dini Kristen; pedagogi terwujud; *imago Dei*; pembentukan spiritual

## **INTRODUCTION**

The first six years of life represent the most formative window in human development, a period in which identity, character, and spirituality are not merely influenced but fundamentally constituted. Within the framework of Christian education, this phase is understood not only as a time of physical and cognitive growth, but also as a critical initial stage in building faith, love, and awareness of God's presence (Chiroma & Chiroma, 2022). Children at this age are understood as whole and valuable individuals, created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Therefore, every dimension of a child's development (physical, emotional, social, and spiritual) must be nurtured holistically through developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

However, in practice, many Christian early childhood educational institutions still adopt secular educational patterns oriented toward cognitive achievement and quantitatively measurable indicators of success. This overemphasis on academic achievement has the potential to shift the focus of Christian education from faith and character formation to academic performativity (Tulus & Duha, 2024). As a result, children's spiritual, relational, and theological dimensions receive less attention in everyday practice. If this condition persists, Christian education risks reducing children to learning subjects judged solely on academic performance, rather than as *imago Dei* called to grow in relationship with God and others.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of spirituality in early childhood education and the urgency of a relational approach to Christian learning. Studies on children's spiritual development emphasize the importance of contextual and relational faith experiences in shaping character (Silitonga et al., 2024). The study of educational theology has also placed the doctrine of *imago Dei* as the basis for respecting the dignity of children in Christian educational practices (Schilhab & Groth, 2024). In addition, the ethics of care framework Noddings (in Heid & Kelehear) (2007) strengthens the relational dimension in pedagogy by emphasizing the importance of attention, empathy, and dialogue in the learning process.

However, these studies generally discuss child spirituality, theological anthropology, or relational pedagogy in isolation and have not integrated them systematically within the framework of incarnational theology as the main conceptual

foundation for Christian early childhood education. None has offered an explicit and comprehensive pedagogical paradigm rooted directly in the theology of the Incarnation, one that translates Christological reflection into an operational model for Christian classrooms. Through the Incarnation (Luke 2:1–20; John 1:14), God is present in human form, sanctifying all aspects of human life, including childhood, as reflected in simple yet profound practices such as communal prayer and moments of guided reflection (Mata et al., 2025). This gap signals an urgent need for a conceptual framework capable of bridging theological reflection and concrete educational practice.

Based on this gap, this article aims to formulate an incarnational paradigm as the theological and pedagogical foundation for Christian early childhood education. Through reflection on biblical texts on the Incarnation and critical dialogue with contemporary relational education theory, this paper offers a theological framework that positions the Christian classroom as a “modern Bethlehem” a space where love, presence, and faith formation are concretely realized in the lives of children. This framework not only provides formative theological reflection but also presents an operational synthesis that makes the theology of the Incarnation an applicable basis for educational practice. Specifically, this article asks: How can the theology of the Incarnation serve as an operational pedagogical foundation for Christian early childhood education?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a constructive theological research design with a systematic and reflective approach, aimed at developing a conceptual framework for Christian early childhood education grounded in the theology of the Incarnation. Situated within the interpretivist paradigm, this study is conceptual and normative in scope not empirical and its validity rests on the coherence and theological depth of the arguments developed. The theological perspective guiding this study is broadly evangelical-ecumenical, affirming the authority of Scripture as the primary source of theological reflection while remaining in critical dialogue with contributions from Reformed, Catholic, and Pentecostal educational traditions. Two primary data sources were utilized: biblical texts (specifically Luke 2:1–20 and John 1:14) selected

for their direct relevance to the Incarnation narrative and their established centrality in theological reflection on divine presence and embodiment; and secondary literature drawn from peer-reviewed journals and academic monographs published between 2005–2025, prioritizing sources at the intersection of incarnational theology, child development, and Christian pedagogy.

The analysis proceeded through three sequential steps: first, theological description, in which exegetical analysis of the biblical texts identified central themes of embodiment, divine presence, relationality, and grace; second, pedagogical interpretation, in which these theological themes were brought into critical dialogue with contemporary educational theory, including child development, holistic pedagogy, and relational ethics; and third, conceptual formulation, in which an integrative pedagogical framework was developed that translates incarnational theology into operational principles for Christian early childhood education. The trustworthiness of this inquiry is established through credibility, ensured by consistent engagement with primary texts and peer-reviewed literature; transferability, supported by thick conceptual description; dependability, maintained through transparent documentation of the analytical process; and confirmability, achieved by grounding all interpretive claims in traceable biblical and scholarly sources.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Incarnation as a Pedagogical Paradigm**

The Incarnation, as expressed in John 1:14 (NIV) “*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*” is not merely a doctrinal affirmation but a radical pedagogical statement. In becoming human, God did not transmit truth from a distance through propositions or abstract formulations; He entered the full texture of human life, sanctifying it from within. This event establishes a foundational epistemological claim for Christian education: that divine truth is known not primarily through cognitive assimilation but through embodied encounter and relational participation (Purba & Marbun, 2025). The Incarnation thus presents a paradigm that displaces the intellect from the center of learning and replaces it with presence, experience, and transformative relationship.

What makes this paradigm pedagogically significant is not simply that God became human, but *how* He chose to teach. Christ's ministry was not conducted through formal instruction alone. It was enacted through shared meals, physical touch, empathetic listening, and presence among the marginalized, integrating cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions into an indivisible whole (Newbigin, 2000). This stands in direct contrast to the Hellenistic rationalist tradition, which elevated abstract reasoning above lived experience. Jesus' pedagogy, by contrast, affirms that authentic learning is always dialogical and existentially lived, a principle Freire, n.d., (n.d., 2018) later articulated in secular terms, but which finds its ultimate theological expression in the Incarnation itself.

This incarnational paradigm poses a direct challenge to prevailing models of Christian early childhood education that remain captive to cognitive-centered, performance-driven assumptions. When educational success is measured primarily through quantifiable academic indicators, children are implicitly reduced from *imago Dei* (bearers of divine dignity capable of spiritual formation) to learning objects evaluated by output. The Incarnation subverts this logic entirely: if God's own pedagogy prioritized presence over performance and relationship over result, then Christian education that inverts these priorities has, in effect, abandoned its theological foundation (Setiawan et al., 2024).

The practical implication for Christian early childhood education, particularly for children aged 0–6, who learn primarily through sensorimotor experience, emotional attachment, and social interaction, is therefore not a minor methodological adjustment but a paradigmatic reorientation. Educators are called not merely to teach *about* God but to embody God's presence through warm, empathetic, and grace-filled relationships that make divine love tangible in everyday classroom life. In this sense, the Christian classroom is reconceived not as a site of academic preparation but as a “*modern Bethlehem*” a sacred space where the Incarnation continues to unfold through every act of love, every gesture of welcome, and every moment of wonder shared between teacher and child (Galioto, 2022).

## **Embodied Learning and Theological Foundations**

The Incarnation does not only redefine *who* teaches, it redefines *how* human beings learn. Christian anthropology, rooted in the doctrine of embodiment, insists that humans are not primarily *homo cogitans* (thinking beings who acquire truth through rational abstraction) but *homo liturgicus* (creatures whose loves, desires, and spiritual orientations are fundamentally shaped by embodied habits, rhythms, and repeated practices) (I Smith & K. A. Smith, 2014) This distinction carries profound pedagogical consequences. If human formation occurs primarily through what we *do* with our bodies rather than what we *think* in our minds, then education that addresses only the intellect is not merely incomplete, it is anthropologically mistaken. The body is not a vessel for the mind; it is a primary site of theological formation.

This claim directly confronts the dualistic tendency (rooted in Platonic and later Cartesian thought) that has persistently infiltrated Christian educational practice, artificially separating spiritual formation from physical experience, faith from daily action, and the sacred from the embodied. The Incarnation demolishes this dualism at its foundation. When God chose to become flesh, He did not reluctantly inhabit a body as a temporary vehicle for spiritual communication; He affirmed the body as the very medium through which divine love, truth, and grace are most concretely revealed Smith (2009) Christian education that perpetuates body-soul dualism therefore contradicts the very theological event it claims to be built upon.

For early childhood education, where children aged 0–6 engage with reality almost entirely through sensory experience, physical movement, and relational touch, this theological affirmation is not abstract but urgently practical. Children do not first understand God and then feel Him; they first *experience* God through the texture of loving relationships, the rhythm of communal prayer, the warmth of a teacher's embrace, and the beauty of creation encountered with wonder. Practices such as singing hymns together, making liturgical gestures, sharing in blessing, and receiving gentle touch are not supplementary decorations to “real” learning, they *are* the learning, because they form the bodily habits through which children's loves and desires are oriented toward God long before their cognition can articulate why (Bellous, 2021). This is what it means for the classroom to function as a small

liturgical space: not a space where religious content is delivered, but a space where children are repeatedly formed through the rhythms of grace.

What distinguishes incarnational embodied pedagogy from merely activity-based learning is its explicitly theological intentionality. Every embodied practice in the Christian early childhood classroom carries sacramental potential, the capacity to mediate God's presence to a child who is not yet equipped to receive it abstractly. A teacher who kneels to a child's eye level, who listens with full attention, who responds to a child's question about death or God with honesty and tenderness, is not simply applying good pedagogy, she is enacting the Incarnation. She is making the Word flesh again in the particular, embodied, relational moment of that child's formation. This is the theological depth that separates Christian early childhood education from its secular counterparts: not its content alone, but its conviction that every embodied act of love in the classroom participates in God's ongoing redemptive work in the world.

### **Relational Presence in Christian Early Childhood Education**

The theological foundation for relational presence in Christian education is most vividly displayed in Mark 10:13–16, where Jesus does not merely acknowledge the children brought to Him, He actively embraces them, lays hands on them, and declares that the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. This is not a gesture of sentimental warmth; it is a theological statement of the highest order. In a first-century context where children occupied the lowest rungs of social significance, Jesus' deliberate, physical, and empathetic engagement with them constitutes a radical affirmation of their dignity as full participants in the Kingdom of God (Keener, 2014). The disciples' attempt to restrict the children's access reveals the default human tendency to gatekeep grace, and Jesus' response reveals that incarnational love operates in precisely the opposite direction: it moves toward the vulnerable, the small, and the overlooked.

This biblical pattern establishes a non-negotiable anthropological premise for Christian early childhood education: every child, without exception, bears the *imago Dei* (the image of God) and therefore possesses intrinsic dignity, spiritual capacity, and relational worth that precedes and transcends any academic achievement or

developmental milestone (Bunge, 2006). This is not merely a theological nicety but a subversive educational claim. In contexts where children's value is implicitly measured by cognitive output, behavioral compliance, or readiness for the next developmental stage, the doctrine of *imago Dei* insists that a child's worth is constitutive, not performative, grounded in who they *are* before God, not what they can *produce* for the institution. Christian early childhood educators who internalize this conviction are compelled toward a fundamentally different posture: not the authoritative dispenser of knowledge, but the reverent witness to God's image already present in each child (Norsworthy, 2024).

Relational presence is the pedagogical expression of this theological conviction the means by which *imago Dei* is honored, not merely affirmed. Authentic care requires attentiveness, responsiveness, and genuine engagement with the particular needs and experiences of the other (Hasibuan et al., 2025). But incarnational relational presence goes further than Noddings (in Heid & Kelehear) (2007) secular account. It is not simply ethically motivated care; it is theologically grounded witness, an act of recognizing and responding to the divine image in the child, and of making God's love concretely tangible through the quality of one's presence (Shields, 2022). When a teacher listens without distraction, responds with tenderness to a child's fear, or creates a classroom environment where every child feels genuinely known and unconditionally welcomed, she is not merely practicing good pedagogy, she is performing a theological act that participates in God's own relational movement toward humanity.

This understanding transforms discipleship from a curriculum to be delivered into a relationship to be inhabited. Children's faith formation does not occur primarily through doctrinal instruction but through the accumulated experience of being loved, seen, heard, and valued by trusted adults within a community of faith (Allen, 2012). Just as Christ formed His disciples not through lecture but through shared life (eating together, traveling together, facing conflict and grief together) so too the formation of young children's faith occurs in the embodied, relational, unhurried rhythms of daily classroom life. The teacher who prays with a child in a moment of anxiety, who celebrates a child's discovery with genuine delight, who repairs a relationship after a moment of harshness, this teacher is not supplementing the curriculum with pastoral

care; she *is* the curriculum. Relational presence, understood incarnationally, is not a pedagogical strategy among others; it is the irreducible core of what it means to educate a child in the way of Christ.

### **Grace and Wonder as Formative Dispositions**

Any serious theological account of Christian early childhood education must reckon with a foundational asymmetry: the learning relationship does not begin with the child's effort or the teacher's instruction (it begins with God. Grace, as articulated in Ephesians 2:8–9, is always prevenient) it precedes, initiates, and makes possible every authentic human response. This has radical implications for how Christian educators understand their vocation. If grace always arrives first, then the classroom is not primarily a space where children *achieve* knowledge of God through disciplined effort, but a space where they *receive* and *respond* to a divine love that has already sought them out before they could seek it. The entire educational enterprise is reframed, from a performance to be executed, to a gift to be received; from a ladder to be climbed, to a table to which every child is already invited (Palmer, 1993).

This grace-centered reframing strikes directly at the performance-driven logic that dominates much of contemporary education, including, troublingly, many Christian educational institutions. When children internalize the message that their worth is conditional upon achievement, compliance, or measurable output, they are being formed in a theology of works, regardless of what the curriculum explicitly teaches. Grace as a pedagogical foundation insists on the opposite: that every child enters the classroom already beloved, already dignified, already held within God's redemptive purposes. The teacher's role, therefore, is not to dispense approval based on performance but to embody and make visible the unconditional acceptance that God has already extended to each child (Hyde & Upton, 2025). In this sense, a grace-centered classroom is not a space of lowered expectations, it is a space of liberated learning, where children are free to explore, to fail, to question, and to grow precisely because their standing before God and their teacher does not depend on the outcome.

Wonder is the natural human response to grace, the disposition of the soul that opens itself to receive what cannot be manufactured or mastered. Theologically,

wonder is not merely an emotional reaction to novelty; it is a spiritual posture of receptivity before the mystery and majesty of God's creative and redemptive work. The Psalmist's declaration: *Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God?* (Psalm 77:13 NIV). Captures this precisely: wonder arises at the intersection of human limitation and divine infinitude, where the soul recognizes that reality is far larger, far more beautiful, and far more gracious than it had previously imagined. Heschel (2015) describes this posture as "*radical awe*" a way of inhabiting the world that remains perpetually open to the inexhaustible depth of God's presence in creation, in history, and in the faces of other human beings. For Heschel, the loss of wonder is not merely an aesthetic impoverishment but a spiritual catastrophe, the closure of the self to the very dimension of reality in which God is most palpably encountered.

Children, by virtue of their developmental stage and their not-yet-calcified perception of the world, are the most natural embodiments of this theological disposition. They have not yet learned to domesticate reality into manageable categories; they encounter the world with an openness, spontaneity, and delight that adult cognition tends systematically to suppress. This is precisely why Jesus, in Mark 10:15, identifies the receptivity of a child as the model for entering the Kingdom of God not because children are innocent in a romanticized sense, but because their posture of dependent openness mirrors the disposition that grace requires of all learners before God (Koç, 2023). Wonder, in this sense, is not a childish quality to be outgrown but a theological virtue to be cultivated, a permanent feature of what it means to stand before a God whose depths are inexhaustible and whose works are without end.

The profound pedagogical insight that emerges from holding grace and wonder together is that they function as two inseparable poles of a single formative dynamic. Grace is the divine initiative, God moving toward the child in love, establishing the conditions of safety, acceptance, and belonging within which genuine learning becomes possible. Wonder is the human response, the child moving toward God and the world with curiosity, delight, and openness, drawn forward by the inexhaustible beauty of what grace has made available. Neither is sufficient alone: grace without wonder produces passive recipients who take God's

love for granted; wonder without grace produces restless seekers who never find the ground of rest in which their curiosity can be truly satisfied. Together, they create the formative dynamic that incarnational education requires, a continuous rhythm of divine gift and human response, of loving initiative and grateful exploration (Robinson, 2022).

For the Christian early childhood educator, the practical implication is both demanding and liberating. It is demanding because it requires a fundamental reorientation of what counts as success in the classroom away from measurable outputs and toward the quality of the formative environment itself. A classroom shaped by grace and wonder is one where a child's question about why God allows suffering is met with honest, unhurried engagement rather than a pre-packaged answer; where the beauty of a spider's web discovered on the playground becomes an occasion for theological reflection; where failure is received not with disappointment but with the reassurance that growth, not perfection, is the goal of incarnational education. It is liberating because it releases both teacher and child from the exhausting performance of achievement, grounding the entire educational relationship in the prior and unconditional love of God that makes all genuine learning (and all genuine life) possible.

### **Integrating Incarnational Theology and Educational Practice**

The preceding sections have established the theological architecture of incarnational education: a paradigm rooted in God's embodied presence in Christ, expressed through embodied learning, sustained by relational presence, and animated by grace and wonder. The question that now demands an answer is not *whether* this theology is compelling — but *how* it concretely transforms the four foundational dimensions of educational practice: pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and community. It is at this point of integration that incarnational theology proves its worth, not as an inspiring framework that floats above the classroom, but as an operational grammar that reshapes every aspect of what happens within it.

*The first* dimension is pedagogy as hospitality. Rooted in Romans 15:7: *Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God* (NIV), incarnational pedagogy reconceives the act of teaching as an act of radical

welcome. The classroom is not primarily a site of instruction but a space of divine hospitality, where every child is received as a bearer of God's image, unconditionally welcomed before a single lesson has been taught or a single skill has been demonstrated (Muyneck, 2025). argues that true hospitality is not mere social courtesy but an act of justice and love that creates belonging for those who have no guarantee of it elsewhere (Pohl, 2014). In the early childhood context, this means the teacher's first and most fundamental task is not curriculum delivery but the creation of an environment so permeated by grace, warmth, and genuine attentiveness that every child (regardless of ability, background, or temperament) experiences themselves as fully known and fully loved. This is not preparation for incarnational education; it *is* incarnational education, because it is the precise pattern of how God in Christ has related to humanity from the moment of the Incarnation.

*The second* dimension is curriculum as narrative participation. A theologically grounded curriculum does not merely organize content around Christian themes — it invites children into active participation in the grand redemptive narrative of Scripture: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration (Bartholomew & Goheen, 2014). This narrative framework transforms the curriculum from a syllabus of information to be mastered into a story to be inhabited, one in which every child discovers that they are not passive spectators but active participants in God's ongoing work in the world. Smith (2016) argues persuasively that education is fundamentally a matter of forming desires, loves, and imagination, not merely filling minds with correct propositions. A curriculum shaped by incarnational theology therefore attends as much to what children *love* and *long for* as to what they *know*, using story, song, ritual, creative exploration, and embodied practice to orient children's deepest desires toward God, toward others, and toward the restoration of creation. In this way, every learning activity (from a nature walk to a sharing circle to a retelling of the Christmas story) becomes a means of forming children as participants in the divine narrative rather than consumers of religious content.

*The third* dimension is assessment as gift and growth. Perhaps no aspect of contemporary education stands in sharper tension with incarnational theology than conventional assessment practices, which tend to reduce the complexity of a child's development to a numerical score or a ranked performance. A theologically reframed

understanding of assessment, rooted in the doctrine of sanctification, which understands human growth as God's gracious and ongoing work rather than human achievement, insists that evaluation must serve formation, not judgment. In the early childhood context, this means assessment is not a mechanism for sorting children by ability but a practice of attentive witness, a means by which educators observe, celebrate, and thoughtfully respond to the unique trajectory of each child's growth across spiritual, emotional, relational, and cognitive dimensions. The teacher who documents a child's growing capacity for empathy, or notices the emergence of wonder in a child's encounter with creation, or recognizes the spiritual significance of a child's question about God, this teacher is practicing incarnational assessment: honoring the full humanity of the child as *imago Dei* in process, held within the grace of a God who is not finished with any of us yet.

*The fourth* and culminating dimension is community as the primary site of formation. Incarnational education is irreducibly communal because the God it reflects is irreducibly communal, the Trinity, as Bruto et al., (2024) argues, reveals that relationality is not an attribute God possesses but the very essence of who God is. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in an eternal communion of mutual love, self-giving, and shared life and human beings, created in this triune image, are constitutively relational: we become who we are *through* our relationships, not prior to them. This Trinitarian anthropology means that Christian early childhood education cannot be reduced to a transaction between an individual teacher and an individual child; it must be embedded within and expressed through a living community of faith in which children experience, over time and through accumulated relationship, what it means to be loved, to belong, to forgive and be forgiven, to serve and be served (Grenz, 1996). The community of the classroom, understood in this light, is not a context for education, it is the *medium* of education, the relational body through which the Holy Spirit works to form children into the likeness of Christ.

The integrative contribution of this article, therefore, is this: incarnational theology does not merely add a spiritual dimension to early childhood education, it fundamentally reorders its entire logic. Where secular education asks "*What does this child need to know?*", incarnational education asks "*Who is this child becoming, and how does this learning environment participate in God's work of forming them?*"

Where conventional pedagogy positions the teacher as the authoritative source of knowledge, incarnational pedagogy positions the teacher as a fellow participant in divine grace, one who teaches, above all, by the quality of her presence, the depth of her love, and the integrity of her own ongoing formation in Christ. The Christian classroom, when shaped by the theology of the Incarnation, becomes what this article has called a "*modern Bethlehem*" not a place where God is talked about from a safe distance, but a place where God's love is made flesh again, in the particular, irreplaceable, daily encounter between a teacher who knows she is loved and a child who is learning, moment by moment, that she is loved too.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has argued that the theology of the Incarnation (God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ) is not merely a doctrinal affirmation but the most generative pedagogical paradigm available to Christian early childhood education. Through the four integrated dimensions of incarnational practice developed in this study, pedagogy as hospitality, curriculum as narrative participation, assessment as gift and growth, and community as the primary site of formation, it has been demonstrated that the Christian classroom is capable of becoming something far more than a site of academic preparation: it can become a "*modern Bethlehem*," a sacred space where God's love, presence, and redemptive work are made concretely real in the lives of children aged 0–6. This reorientation demands that Christian educators reconceive their vocation not as the delivery of religious content but as the embodiment of divine grace present, attentive, and formative in every interaction, every ritual, and every relationship that constitutes the daily life of the classroom.

The broader implication of this study extends beyond the individual classroom to the church and Christian educational institutions as a whole. When incarnational theology is allowed to fully inhabit educational practice (rather than merely decorate it) it produces a community of formation that reflects the very life of the Trinity: relational, self-giving, and oriented toward the flourishing of every child as a bearer of God's image. Future research is needed to examine how this incarnational framework translates empirically into diverse Christian early childhood contexts, particularly in non-Western settings where communal and spiritual dimensions of

education have historically been more naturally integrated. What this article has established is the theological and conceptual foundation upon which such research can stand: that to educate a young child in the way of Christ is, at its deepest level, to continue the Incarnation, to make the Word flesh again, in this classroom, with these children, today.

### AI Usage Declaration

The authors declare that artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript solely for editorial assistance, including language refinement, structural editing, and consistency checking. All theological arguments, biblical interpretations, conceptual frameworks, and scholarly claims presented in this article are the original intellectual contribution of the authors. The use of AI tools did not involve the generation of new ideas, theoretical constructs, or research findings. Final editorial decisions regarding content, argumentation, and interpretation remain entirely the responsibility of the authors. This declaration is made in accordance with emerging transparency standards in academic publishing.

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