

Icons of Leadership in Incarnation Theology: A Challenge to Political Leadership in Nigeria

Ezichi A. Ituma

Abstract

Incarnation theology is the examination of the implication of the Godhead taking a human form in Jesus of Nazareth. As a research topic it examines the political implications of the theology as it relates to Nigerian socio-political dynamics. Applying redaction methodology, the research insists that the New Testament authors of incarnation theology did not represent a dry effort to establish the divinity of Christ in a world where political class struggle was inconsequential. There is a lot to learn from this theology and to apply so as to salvage the socio-political crisis of Nigeria.

Introduction

Incarnation theology has occupied the interest of scholars who want to show either that Jesus was human and divine or that the Christian doctrine of Christology is baseless. Unfortunately the more the arguments are advanced the more one forgets some basic icons of leadership in the texts. While the coming of Jesus in the flesh, which the Christian theology calls incarnation and his dying on the cross, called atonement, occupy the reflection of the ordinary mind with a sense of mystery it is very important to note that in the incarnation theology God gave example which should guide human leadership approach for a better society. In the process of incarnation God gave examples that would not only deliver man from numerous troubles but also lead man in political serenity. The Bible describes the 'flesh', not as what man has but as what man is: a weakness and frailty that is short-lived in contrast to the 'spirit' which is eternal and proceeds from the breath of God (Is. 31:3; Ps. 145:21; Matt. 16:17). Christian theology therefore holds that God came down and became man, in the flesh, without ceasing to be God. This is the position described in the words of John:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (John 1:1, 14)

J. I. Packer has noted that “Neither the noun ‘incarnation’ nor the adjective ‘incarnate’ is biblical, but the Gk. equivalent of Lat. *in carne* (*en sarki*, ‘in flesh’) is found in some important NT statements about the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹ However, it has become a theological concept which defines the crux of Christian theology. Without this concept the Christian theology lacks value and credence in a multi-religious world. Paul describes this as ‘mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh’ (1 Tim. 3:16). And John declares, ‘Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God’ (1 John 4:2).

Incarnation is a theological concept that demonstrates the manifestation of the almighty God in human form. The Father sends the Son; the Word became flesh; God was in Christ. The Synoptic writers are unanimous that Jesus was thoroughly human; a first century Jew with emotional experiences and cultural attachment.² He grew from infancy to adulthood (Luke 2: 52), called the son of David (Matt. 1: 6; Luke 2:4; 3: 31) and the son of Adam (Luke 3: 38). He calls himself a man (John 8:40). In fact, the whole range of experiences he underwent as recorded in the Gospels clearly place him as man.

That he was God is also attested in all the Gospels. His miracles portrayed him as one who had authority over creation (Matt. 8: 23 – 27; 14: 22 – 23). He had the power to forgive sin, a prerogative of God (Matt. 9: 2 – 8; Mark 2: 3 – 12; Luke 5: 18 – 26). He represented equality with God, sharing the divine nature (Matt. 11: 25 – 27; John 5: 19 – 23; 10: 14 – 30; 14: 1ff). The resurrection was another strong portrayal of divinity. But, even outside these texts it was in the Prologue of John that the divinity of Christ is most vividly presented, hence the text – John 1: 14. How Jesus of Nazareth could simultaneously be God and yet one is what scholars have called *the problem of the incarnation*.³

However, the aim of this paper is not to delve into the theological arguments surrounding the problem of incarnation. The assumption is that incarnation is an accepted Christian doctrine. The purpose is therefore to

investigate into the significance of this concept to Christendom as it affects leadership in Nigeria. What is the emulating or communicable leadership character of God in incarnation? How has the Nigerian Christian fared in comparison with this divine character that is supposedly inherent in the Christian? A theological concept that has no solution to a socio-cultural problem is dry and unnecessary for the society. Nigeria is a society blessed with enormous representation of zealous Christians. How far is this representation a socio-cultural and political blessing? No doubt the Church must be a blessing to the society to sustain its relevance. This is the mission of the Church.

John 1:14 is part of the Prologue (1: 1 – 18) of John’s Gospel. The Prologue gives “the key to the understanding of this Gospel, and makes clear how the evangelist wishes his readers to approach his presentation of the Lord’s work and Person”⁴ – Johannine Christology.

The Lord existed from all eternity. As far as the human mind can go back, the Lord Jesus was there. He never was created. He had no beginning. The Word was with God. He had a separate and distinct personality. He was a real Person who lived with God. He not only dwelled with God, He Himself was God. There is one God and there are three Persons in the Godhead – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That the *Logos* became flesh is a Christian point of distinction from both Judaism concept of the *Logos* and from the Greeks philosophy of the *Logos*. However, the Johannine writer attributes this *Logos* with the historical Jesus of Nazareth. The Gnostics would not see any affinity between the loving God and flesh – sarx – which is evil. The world of matter is evil and has no relation with the God who dwells in heaven, for the Gnostics. Redaction critical methodology was necessary so as to establish the theological motivation of the author of Johannine writings as inclusive of socio-political dynamics. Theological motivation of the author was not a dry effort to establish the divinity of Christ in a world where political class struggle was inconsequential. It was James and John who went to Jesus requesting a special political position in the kingdom (Mark 10: 35-45). Jesus understood their political self-centredness and gave positive guidelines to guide the Christian in politics.

Incarnation by Etymology

Incarnation is derived from the Latin *incarnare* – in flesh. “It means to embody in flesh, give human form to – to personify.”⁵ When this definition is theologically reviewed a focus on Jesus Christ of Nazareth becomes paramount. According to John Eddison, “This word does not appear in the

Bible, but was coined because it expressed what is stated over and over again in the New Testament, namely that Jesus Christ was God ‘manifest in the flesh’⁶

Incarnation as a theological term expresses the revelation of God in the flesh. The implication is that God came down and became fully human. He was subjected to all human limitations, including dying as a created physical being. Here God, who created, appeared to man in the person of Jesus Christ.⁷ But he that died was, and remains God. He was fully man without ceasing to be God.

Ἰησους, transliterated Jesus is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew name Jeshua, (later form, Joshua).⁸ It was a common name among the Jews. In Exodus 17:13 and Joshua 1:1 mention is made of Joshua (Jesus) the successor of Moses. In the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:29⁹ a mention is also made of Jesus son of Eliezer. In Colossians 4:11 Jesus who is called Justus was Paul’s fellow worker.

That Jesus, who is called the Christ, took up a human name among a people shows historicity. The genealogy of Joseph his father and Mary his mother is attested to in Matthew, Luke and various other extra-biblical materials.¹⁰ Except for dogmatic approach where some believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary, the names of Jesus’ four brothers, Jacob, Joseph, Judah, and Simon, are mentioned with several of his sisters (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55f). He was baptized at the age of thirty in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius by John the Baptist. That Jesus engaged in a carpentry occupation is most likely credible. In the synagogue the congregation busted out in astonishment “is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary...? (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55). Geza Vermes has argued that “In Talmudic sayings the Aramaic noun denoting carpenter or craftsman (nagger) stands for a “scholar” or “learned man.”¹¹ But if Jesus, as a carpenter, was such a scholar the Jews would not have expressed any astonishment at his wisdom. His public occupation is not in doubt as he himself says today and tomorrow I shall be casting out devils and working cures; on the third day I reach my goal (Luke 13:32).¹²

It is very clear that the trial was illegal. The political juries were Herod Antipas, the Chief Priests, and Pilate. When the Chief Priests transferred the case to Pontius Pilate’s tribunal they did not ask for their findings to be confirmed, but laid a fresh charge before the Prefect of Judah, namely that Jesus was a political agitator with pretensions to being the king of the Jews.¹³ There is no doubt that Jesus was a politician. He lived and died for politics. It should be recalled that polity of the Jews was a theocratic state;

involving in the religious leadership of the Jews means involving in their politics as well. That Jesus was a Rabbi means he was a lawyer, teacher and master. This is why he could challenge some socio-political axioms of the day. In fact, an offending Jew was not yet formally guilty until a Rabbi had legally confirmed the offence. Rabbis were involved in the political adjudication of the land.

But the significance of the incarnation is the love of God. That God is both transcendent and immanent express how much God could condescend so low, taking up humanity that humanity may take up divinity; becoming a servant that He might lead the world back to her owner. This is the less-stressed, if not forgotten, aspect of the incarnation. Yet, the incarnation could not be expressed without this basic truth.

Purpose of the Incarnation

But God did not just decide to adopt this approach for the sake of the method. That God decided to adopt the method of empathy was to express love which is a constitutive integral part of divine ontology. The incarnation theology of John has to be grasped in this mindset for a better understanding of the tests. He expressed this in the following words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son” (John 3:16). The following verse buttressed this point — “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (3:17).

All the Synoptic Gospels re-echo this basic purpose of the incarnation. It was an expression of God’s love for man who is depraved and daily alienated from God’s commission and love. John stressed God’s love more than any other Gospel. For “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This is the *missio Dei*. God was the first missionary. Rather, God is the missionary. The Christian is only co-opted to share in the *missio-Dei* by God himself.

God had all the power to drop down from human without the impartation or putting on of human flesh. He had all the right to deny man of eternal life in His kingdom. But He chose to wear human flesh, stripping off the heavenly glory for a people that would not appreciate his love. To deliver man was God’s initiative. To adopt the method of incarnation was the height of love. The Father decided to share all the affections and dispositions of man so as to deliver man. Man was saved so as to share in the divine character. One could hear Paul stressing this point, “Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come” (2Corinthians 5:17).

Leadership in the Incarnation

The Son left the glory of the Father in heaven and condescended to the earth not only to save man but to also show man a life of service and humility. That the Son left the Father's glory and **throne** for the self-alienated world is the height of divine love. No wonder John concludes, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15: 13). The commission of the disciples is an outcome of the love expressed in the incarnation. Incarnation was the commission of the Father on the Son. The significance of this is the love of the Father which restores order, peace and development in the habitat.¹⁴ This in turn is the significance of the commission of the disciples. They were commissioned to express the love Jesus has for humanity. They were commissioned to restore the peace of Christ in the habit. This is the commission that was lost at the Garden of Eden. It was a leadership injunction.

Then God said, 'Let us make man in our own image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'**Gen.1:26**

The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. **Gen.2:15**

The second citation complements the first. God made man in His image not to see the created world as his (man's) goods and chattels to be ravaged and disposed of at will. Man was created to lead the creation for God and to the glory of God. Man was meant to organise and control the world by God's policies guiding natural phenomena and placements.

We also find Jesus reinstating the leadership role of Peter in the last chapter of John's Gospel. In 21:15 - 18 a recall is probably made of the three-fold denial of Peter at the trial of Jesus. "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" (John 21: 15). The three-fold question therefore receives a three-fold affirmation. Peter was aggrieved, not by the change from *ἀγαπας* to *φιλειν* (love) in the question but in the repetitions. It is obvious that inferiority in the love is not implied but rather a synonymous use of *ἀγαπας* and *φιλειν* (love). The question probably demands love more than the rest of

the disciples, though the probability of love more than the fishing is not totally out of place.

“Feed my sheep” is a three-fold commission that results from a restoration. The last words of the parting master are of great importance to the disciples. Peter was required to feed the sheep. “Feed my sheep” means leading the people or heritage of God by wholehearted commitment to their welfare out of divine love. Empathy and passion were to characterize the leader’s commitment to God’s heritage. Feed my sheep demonstrates how Jesus shows how concern for the material and spiritual need of his disciples. Man’s welfare is the Master’s concern.

In this post-resurrection instruction John also demonstrates God’s concern for the welfare of the generality of the people. God is as interested in the socio-economic well being of man as he is of his spiritual well being. The reason why God endows the church in recent times with prosperity is for the total well being of the people and not for the self-enriching of preachers. The present prosperity preaching of many Nigerian preachers, who extort so much from members, only to erect skyscrapers for personal boasting, is outside Johannine recommendation.

Wealth was given for the advancement of the kingdom of God. Exploitation of members on the part of some preachers is an indication of destruction or devouring of the sheep. Wealth was given so that the Church can be a channel of good road, good water, food etc. to the society. This is the Synoptic “light” which the believer was called to be. This is the mission of Jesus transferred to the Church. This is the leadership role the Church is called to play in a world of socio-political and economic cataclysm. To what extent, therefore, is the Church exhibiting this leadership role in the welfare of the Nigerian people? This is a question that requires an answer.

It is very significant that the Gospel of John ends with two-fold instruction –“As the father has sent me, even so I send you” and “Feed my Sheep”. These two imperatives are the strongest missionary demand of the Church from a parting Master.

The mission of the Church is informed by God’s revelation in Jesus of Nazareth who historically treaded the soil of Palestine, was crucified at Golgotha, and raised again from the dead, according to the belief of the Church. The revelation of God in the Son marks the eschatological dawn that brings salvation within the reach of all and leading to the final consummation of the Age. In this regard Hahn says mission is “the church’s service, made possible by the coming of Christ and the dawning of the eschatological event of salvation... The Church goes in confidence and hope to meet the future of

its Lord, with the duty of testifying before the whole world to God's love and redemptive deed."¹⁵ The emphasis is on service prompted by the incarnation. Incarnation itself is an expression of God's love.

Implication for Nigeria

The Church

The Church was called to be the vanguard of the Kingdom of God. She was meant to represent Jesus in the world where injustice and oppression characterised the activities of men. With the new nature characterised by divine love one expects the qualities of incarnation, at least the communicable attributes, to be manifested in the Christian. The Church, as a collective body of Christians, is expected to lead in the war against evil, injustice and oppression in the nation. The Christian body should speak out as the last hope for the common man.

On the leadership of the Church, it is expected that the qualities which made Jesus a great leader should characterise the lives of the pastors and other levels of church leadership. Unfortunately church leadership in Nigeria in some denominations is now informally divided between Bishops or General Overseers (President and Founder) and Pastors. The Pastors are the ones who are in close touch with the members. They know the sheep and the sheep knows them. The Bishops or General Overseers are political potentates who are both circular and religious. They only know the frontline political money bags in the church. They are the ones who frequent the Seat of Power to tell the President that all is well when actually the structures are in devastation and shambles. They go with local thugs, conventionally called *akpuobis* (touts), for security. Also, because their bible is too heavy for them to carry they engage the services of Christian *akpuobi* to help carry the Bible from their *Moses Seat* to the pulpit. Ordinary church member can hardly receive the attention of such political "President and Founder". Yes, he is too 'big' to be seen. In many cases it is easier for a church member to see the political president of the nation or governor of the state than to see this *Great Man of God*. Jesus and the apostles did not teach us so. Simplicity and humility was Jesus' leadership style. Church leadership in Nigeria is sick. We should reflect the character of the incarnation which is supposed to be an intrinsic virtue for godly survival. Sacrifice and altruism were Jesus' leadership lifestyle. Jesus said, "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Luke 22: 25 – 26).

The Nigerian Christian is expected to show love to really justify the impartation of the divine gift. More so, with the multiple number of Christians who apparently show zeal for God it is hard to believe there could be antagonism. The unfortunate interdenominational cold war among Christians is the opposite of God's nature. Even among believers of the same denomination it is difficult sometimes to see genuine love. Self aggrandizement and egocentricism which characterise the life-style of many preachers are not expected. How would Nigeria look like if a good percentage of those who profess Christianity possess the divine nature? Wickedness, exploitation of members by the pastor, who gets richer and the member gets poorer is an unwelcome character of many churches. Unfortunately, pride and arrogance have become the *sign of righteousness*, as "*the righteous are as bold as lion*", "*God has not given us the spirit of fear*" — all these scriptures now quoted out of context. There is rarely unity in any quarter. "Feed my sheep" is now "Dupe my Sheep". A Christian who refuses to see humility as a virtue quotes one of these passages, out of context, to advance insult on those who are suppose to reprimand him. Some are very bold to do evil and quote the bible to support their nefarious acts. It is not completely out of place to say that what we find in the Nigerian secular society is a replica of what is found inside the church. Yes, the same people who perpetrate the evil in the church are also there in the political arena to continue their nefarious acts.

Nigerian Politics

When the Obasanjo administration took over leadership in Nigeria most people expressed a great relief. Interestingly the President publicly declared that he was a born again Christian. It was a great challenge to Christianity because it was almost said that a Christian can no longer be President in the country. This time it was not a nominal Christian but "born again". All eyes were open to see how a Christian was going to transform the nation. Unfortunately at the end of that administration it was difficult to quantify the enormity of economic waste, corruption and wickedness that have characterised this *born again* administration. At the eve of the handing over of the Obasanjo administration to the next, heavily-armed mobile police men and die hard rugged soldiers were spread all over the streets to clamp down any form of protest against the *military civilian* dictatorship and election irregularities. It was quite clear that the citizens had lost confidence in that administration. The people were fed up with socio-political anomalies that characterised the administration. At the end peoples' conscience had to be

suppressed. The government that was supposed to showcase the incarnation godliness became a den of robbers and ravaging monsters. In October 2006, the President and Chairman of Council of Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM Chartered), Alhaji Mohammed Abubakar (FNIM), “painted a pathetic picture of how past leaders contributed to the woes of the nation by misappropriating a whopping sum of \$480billion since 1960. In almost all the socio-economic sectors of the nation, management failure has assumed epidemic proportions. He added that the nation was “in the harvest season for the many years of mismanagement sown.”¹⁶ Indiscipline, gross misconduct, and acute mismanagement of public fund have become irrevocably endemic in the fabrics of Nigerian politics. Who is safe in Nigeria, when the church leaders who suppose to speak out for the masses have become political sycophants?

Conclusion

John presents the incarnation in a such a manner that God’s interest the socio-political and economic wellbeing of the people is not in doubt. That God left His throne for a people who did not love nor reciprocate His love is a challenge. The height of humility expressed in the incarnation theology of John is worth emulating. If only the features of this incarnation would be imbibed and expressed the world would be a better place to live. The present prosperity preaching in Nigeria, where the pastor preaches prosperity for members yet only the pastor is prospering has no basis in the incarnation humility expressed in John’s gospel.

Onwu has posed a challenge:

Poverty and wealth have to be understood within the context of the cross with its challenging lifestyles and the pursuit of righteousness. The neglect of such themes has actually encouraged flamboyancy, unhealthy competition, arrogance and greed within the house of God. It has led many to become suspicious of the gospel as “another gospel” (Gal 1:6-8) too materialistic and humanistic.¹⁷

The Craze for wealth among preachers, especially at the expense of the church poor member, is not a character of incarnation. God gave all by giving his Son. He did not exploit all but gave all. Onwu’s challenge must be noted

very seriously. A lifestyle that neglects righteousness is a life outside the cross.

The Nigerian public institution is another area leadership challenge should be noted. The Christian, for example, is suppose to follow the example of Christ both as a student as a lecturer. The Christian student is expected to pursue his students with high sense of commitment, humility and righteousness. By this committed effort he exemplifies himself to his fellow students. The lecturer himself is expected to lead the students by example. Johannine incarnation theology is a theology of example. In the University System a Christian who does not execute his assignment in humility and righteousness is not worth the name a Christian. Such Christian is far from the character of incarnation. Love should be the backdrop of every Christian practice. John emphasises, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12). Paul concludes, “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1cor. 13:1). Nigeria will have a better society if only the seemingly zealous Christians will possess some measure of love and humility that characterised the incarnation.

END NOTE

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