

Article

There is Hope in the Incarnation—Challenging the Bibliological Docetism of Today's Evangelicalism

Dănuț Mănăstireanu ¹  and Dănuț Jemna ^{2,*}¹ Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge University, Cambridge CB5 8BJ, UK; danutm@gmail.com² Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, University Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 700506 Iași, Romania

* Correspondence: danut.jemna@uaic.ro

Abstract: The authors argue that the future existence of evangelicalism as an ecclesial tradition depends on its ability and courage to re-imagine the dual nature, human and divine, of the Bible as written revelation and, consequently, to renew the way that this community engages with it. Such an endeavour requires a new way of understanding and engaging with the Bible that can be built around the model of the Incarnation. As mainline Protestants, who ministered for many years in evangelical ecclesial communities and who have conducted extensive doctoral and post-doctoral research in patristic and contemporary theological studies, the authors are convinced that if evangelicalism is to survive and flourish in the complexities of the contemporary world, it requires a new hermeneutic. It should move away from a dominating docetic view of the Scripture, which overemphasises its divine nature, to the detriment, and sometimes the total neglect, of its human authorship, to give a full account of its dual nature, equally divine and human.

Keywords: evangelicalism; incarnation; biblical hermeneutics; bibliological Docetism



Citation: Mănăstireanu, Dănuț, and Dănuț Jemna. 2024. There is Hope in the Incarnation—Challenging the Bibliological Docetism of Today's Evangelicalism. *Religions* 15: 1256. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15101256>

Academic Editor: Ronald T. Michener

Received: 30 September 2024

Revised: 11 October 2024

Accepted: 15 October 2024

Published: 16 October 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In a text published in 1951, entitled ‘The Loss of Scriptural Mind’, Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky complained that people of his time considered the language of the Scripture and Tradition to be irrelevant, unable to respond to the real problems of society. The solution proposed by the Russian theologian is not an adaptation of the language of the Scripture to the contemporary person, but the transformation of the modern mind through the preaching of the Scripture. It involves an effort to preach a whole Christ and to rediscover his presence together with believers in history. For Florovsky, this may be the most effective way to preach the Word of God in a world in crisis. Such an approach entails a permanent actualisation of the implications of Chalcedonian Christology, assuming that the Incarnation of the Son of God presupposes a relevant permanence of his presence in the world through the Scripture and the Church (Florovsky 1951, pp. 12–13).

In a more recent text, Protestant theologian Peter Enns reconsiders the topic of the Scripture in relation to the Incarnation and challenges the evangelical community by suggesting that believers should become ‘more hermeneutically self-conscious, i.e., putting aside modern assumptions, as much as possible, and learning ancient ways’ (Enns 2007). For Enns, this model, which represents ‘the ancient and honoured analogy of Christ’s incarnation’, would be very helpful in the current evangelical debates about the interpretation of the Scripture.

In line with the two authors cited above, we emphasise, in this paper, the essential role of preaching the Scripture today in society and consider that the contemporary church, among other things, can reinvigorate the proclamation of the biblical message by standing on the solid ground of God’s Incarnation. Furthermore, within this context, the kenosis of the Son of God implies a revelational and scriptural kenosis, and it also requires a kenosis on the part of believers, a sacrificial attitude that makes possible the incarnation of the message of the Scripture in people’s lives.

The rediscovery of the ‘scriptural mind’ and the identification of the best ways to engage with the Scripture are essentially important tasks for every generation of Christians. Preaching the Scripture faithfully, in order to produce *metanoia* (a change of mind) in society, calls for a constant evaluation of the Church’s own understanding of the nature and importance of the Bible, as well as of the way that it is received in the context of communicarian/liturgical worship and in the daily life of the faithful. In particular, the evangelical community needs to re-evaluate its own model of understanding and interpreting the Scripture in the context of important transformations in recent decades that are giving rise to both divisions and new orientations (on these, see [Putman 2015](#); [Brown and Silk 2016](#); [Gushee 2020](#); [Elliot et al. 2023](#)).

In this paper, we highlight a few aspects that can contribute to the effort of rediscovering the scriptural mind in the evangelical community, using the framework of the theology of Incarnation. In the first main section of this paper, we emphasise the patristic bases of the incarnational model of the Scripture, which is lacking in evangelical works such as that of Enns. The next section is devoted to presenting some hermeneutical implications of using the parallelism between Christ and the Scripture in terms of their dual nature. In the last section of our paper, we show some implications of the renewed scriptural mind, particularly the way in which the hermeneutical model that we proposed can impact the lives of believers and Christian communities. The paper ends with conclusions and references.

2. Incarnation and the Scripture

In the patristic literature, the theme of the Incarnation of the Logos (Jn. 1:14) is considered a foundation of Christian revelation, with essential implications for understanding the divine plan of creation, salvation, and the gift of eternal life for humankind and creation. But, this truth of the appropriation of our nature by the Son of God will always be a source of scandal to the human mind (1Cor. 2:14), so generations of Church Fathers will have to struggle to affirm it and to find the clearest ways of expressing it in theological language. At stake is the true identity of Jesus Christ, who the Scripture and the Christian community affirm to be both God and man. From the beginning of its existence, the Church has had to confront heresies that question the Incarnation of the Son, through which the divine Logos became the human Jesus Christ. The difficulty in understanding and accepting the fact that God became human gave birth, in some cases, to simplistic solutions. At one extreme of the spectrum we find Docetism, which holds that the divine Word was only apparently manifested as a human being, while at the other extreme, we find Arianism, which emphasises the humanity of Jesus Christ and denies his full divinity. In responding to these heresies, the Church Fathers emphasised not only that the Incarnation admits its own legitimate logic but also that it constitutes the platform on which the whole edifice of Christian theology is built, which has fundamental implications for the daily lives of believers.

In the course of Christian history, the Incarnation will emerge as a paradigm that provides a framework for the development of coherent theology and, in particular, articulate solutions to problems that arise both within and without the Christian community. One such sensitive and important issue is that of the understanding of the nature of the Scripture and its role in the life of the Church. The relationship between Incarnation and the Scripture is suggested first of all by the sacred text itself, which uses the same term word (*logos*) to refer both to a divine person and to the divine message or revelation expressed in human language. Our reading of the New Testament requires us to evaluate the relationship between the two realities, which is not easy to comprehend, as the existence of many positions and even heresies of a Christological nature demonstrate. In order to properly assess the relationship between the Logos and the Scripture, the Fathers of the Church have used various means and approaches, one of the most impactful of these being that of the parallelism between the two.

In a context where the authority of Christian doctrine is questioned, St. Ignatius considers the Scripture to be Jesus Christ, as they deal with the fundamental events of

his life—his cross, death and resurrection—and not as merely the writings of some men (Ignatius, *Epistula ad Philadelphios* 8.2 [Ignatius of Antioch 2002, p. 137]). St. Ignatius does not explain the meaning of his statement. In Origen, however, we find a whole theological argument for the idea that the Scripture is another form of the Incarnation of the Logos (Origen, *Hom Lev* 1.1 [Origen 1990, p. 29]). For this thinker, the divine Word came to us human beings in a clothed or veiled form. He, who is invisible and divine, needed clothing to make himself accessible to us, created beings. At his birth, he received the veil of the body from his mother Mary, and by the economy of God's revelation he was brought to humanity through appropriate clothing, for the veil of the letter is still considered a flesh or body of him in the world. Thus, for Origen, the Scripture is the Word of God incarnate: 'The garments of the Word are the phrases of Scripture; the divine thoughts are clothed in these expressions' (Origen, *Philoc* 15.18–19 [Origen 1911, pp. 76–77]).

This parallelism of the double Incarnation of the Logos in human form is important because it brings with it profound insight concerning the nature of the Scripture. For Origen, the Scripture is a sacramental reality, because it gives us the real presence of the Son of God in the world, since its content is the Logos incarnate in language. Reading the Bible is, thus, an encounter with the very Word of God, and the teaching of the Scripture reveals the divine Logos, just as Jesus Christ did in his earthly life.

This idea of the Scripture as the Incarnation of the Word is present in later patristic thought, emphasising the true nature of the Christian Bible. St. Maximus, for example, argues that in our approach to the Scripture, we must distinguish between the Word of God, which has no flesh, and the incarnate Word. The Scripture is 'flesh in appearance, though Logos by nature'. For 'the Logos becomes flesh in each of the recorded sayings of Scripture' (Maximus, *Capita theol* II. 60 [Maximus the Confessor 1981, p. 151]). Because of our condition as limited beings, we can encounter the person of the Word as the incarnate Logos, and the Scripture offers us precisely this incarnate Son of God.

Even though the patristic literature gives us this idea of the Scripture as the Incarnation of the Logos, the Church Fathers did not elaborate further on this understanding and did not clarify the meaning of the dual nature of the Scripture. The equally human origin of the sacred text has always been regarded as implicit and has been touched on by some authors in the context of debates on biblical hermeneutics.

The history of dogmatic development tells us that people of faith tended to waiver, in both Christology and bibliology, between the extreme of overemphasizing the divine nature, at the risk of excluding or belittling the human dimension (Docetism), and the extreme of overemphasizing the human nature, to the detriment or exclusion of the divine (which is called Arianism in Christology and liberalism in bibliology). For the Church Fathers, however, even if the human origin of the sacred text has been regarded as an objective reality, the risk of bibliological Docetism and its implications have rarely been taken into consideration. This risk is even more evident in the context of current debates on the nature of the biblical text and its interpretation, as we are going to illustrate in the case of contemporary hermeneutics.

In the current discussions about the Scripture and its interpretation, the patristic incarnational model is being rediscovered by authors from all Christian traditions, including evangelicals (de S. Cameron 1985; Enns 2007), in an attempt to find a balance between the divine and human sides of the equation. This approach may be of greater use to more conservative communities (like Orthodoxy and evangelicalism), where the temptation to follow bibliological Docetism is much greater. Such a framework underlines the kenotic dimension of both the Son of God taking on human flesh and the human being receiving God's revelation to become like Christ. This idea is rightly emphasised by St. Ephrem, who says 'he clothed himself in our language, so that he might clothe us in his mode of life. He asked for our form and put this on, and then, as a father with his children, he spoke with our childish state' (Ephrem *HF* 31 [Ephrem the Syrian 2015, p. 192]).

For that to happen, the human mind interacting with the Holy Scripture needs to be illumined by the Spirit. This point opens the horizon to a specific hermeneutical approach,

which has always been emphasised by the Church Fathers. For example, St. Irenaeus highlights that the interpretation of the Scripture is a charismatic exercise, with both the writing and the interpretation of the Scripture being carried out by the same inspiration of the Holy Spirit: ‘for one and the same Spirit of God, who by the Prophets foretold the coming of the Lord and the things to come, gave to the elders also the interpretation of those things which were foretold’ (Irenaeus *Adv Haer* 3.21.4 [Irenaeus of Lyon 2002, p. 753]). In line with this patristic tradition, the incarnational model of revelation leads to a distinctive biblical hermeneutic which works properly only when the light of the Word is received in a ‘kenotic’ state of humility (we use here ‘kenotic’ in an analogical and metaphorical manner, as referring to the human person).

3. Reading the Scripture within the Incarnational Framework

An analysis of the hermeneutical approach of the evangelicals, together with the inadequacy of bibliological Docetism, requires, first of all, a clarification of the concept of revelation with which we are working. Then, in order to be able to use the incarnational model in the hermeneutical plan, we need to point out some of its limitations, since every conceptual model presupposes certain conditions.

According to Origen, revelation is a form of Incarnation of the Logos. Without it, created beings could not know anything about the transcended Creator, who ‘spoke’ the world into being. Furthermore, when we talk about God revealing himself to human beings, the ontological gap between the Creator and his creation requires, unavoidably, the same kind of kenotic condescension of God as that required by the Incarnation of the Son of God in human flesh.

Regarding the process of revelation, it is important to underline what St. Paul says in Romans 1:20: ‘Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made’. And that was so even before humans perceived traces of the divine in their moral consciousness, let alone when the Israelites received the Law. Yet, these were mere shadows. For, as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews says, ‘Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word’ (Hebr. 1:1–3a).

Therefore, before becoming written word, revelation was first and foremost an encounter between the Creator and his image-bearing creatures. The memory of that encounter was preserved within the oral tradition of the people of faith, until, at a certain point in time, it took written form, and later on those writings were gathered into the canon under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, forming the Holy Scripture—those of the people of Israel first and then of the Church. The result was a sacred writing which, as we have explained already, Christians believe has a dual nature, equally divine and human.

However, the coming of the Son into the world presupposes a consideration of the human condition and its state, just as in ancient times when God took the initiative to reveal himself to humanity. In order to be able to redeem us, the Son of God came down and ‘pitched his tent among us’ (Jn. 1:14) in the ‘likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom. 8:3–4), i.e., he had to assume our fallen human nature, since, as the Fathers say, ‘what is not assumed cannot be redeemed’ (St Gregory of Nazianzus, in *Epistolae*, p. 101). What this means, explains Weinandy, is that although Jesus ‘never sinned personally or [. . .], had an inner propensity to sin (concupiscence), nonetheless his humanity was of the race of Adam and he experienced, of necessity, many of the effects of sin which permeate the world and plague human beings—hunger and thirst, sickness and sorrow, temptation and harassment by Satan, being hate and scorn, fear and loneliness, even death and separation from God. The eternal Son of God functioned from within the confines of a humanity altered by sin and the Fall’ (Weinandy 1993, p. 18).

In the same manner as in the case of the kenotic Incarnation of the Son of God, in the ‘coming down’ of God to us in the Holy Scripture, argues Boyd, ‘God stoops an infinite distance to enter into complete solidarity with the limitations, sin, and cursed state of humanity’ (Boyd 2017, p. 643). Thus, the Incarnation becomes a sort of distant analogy, or better said, a parallel for a better understanding of the dual nature of the Scripture. Without this kenotic condescension of God (or ‘divine accommodation’, as Boyd prefers to call it), revelation would have been impossible to comprehend by its human recipients. We may well call this the stumbling block of the human condition.

Despite this legitimate parallelism, there certainly remain major differences between the two. In the case of the mystery of Incarnation, we have to do with a hypostatic union between the divine and human natures within the person of Jesus, while in bibliological terms, the divine and human authors co-operate in a mysterious manner in the creation of a unitary sacred text. Also, while the assumption of fallen human nature by Christ did not include a propensity to sin, and even less so the fall into personal sin, the human authors of the Bible, in order to be fully human, had to keep their limitations and flaws. This is masterfully illustrated by C. S. Lewis in his *Reflections on the Psalms*. As Boyd rightly explains, for Lewis, ‘an honest reading of Scripture makes it evident that “naïveté, error, contradiction,” and even (as in the cursing Psalms) “wickedness are not removed” in the process of God revealing himself through the medium of his fallen and culturally conditioned people. From this, Lewis deduced that while God’s “breathing” through ancient authors exerted a “Divine compulsion” on them, it did not do so in a coercive way that removed their fallen “human qualities’ (Boyd 2017, p. 412).

Consequently, because of the enormous historical and cultural differences between modern people and the original recipients of revelation, we are now called to engage in a ‘kenotic’ hermeneutical exercise to understand and be transformed through interaction with the sacred text of the Bible. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, who inspired and guided the ‘incarnation’ of the Word in human written form, continues to assist believers in this process. The purpose of the Spirit’s inner work in the believers goes beyond *metanoia* and the enlightenment of the mind; it is meant to lead them to continuous transformation (*theosis*) into the likeness of Christ.

It is important to keep in mind this process, and the centrality of Christ the Word in it, because even if the text of the Bible constitutes the legitimate object of our hermeneutical endeavour, our final aim is that, through this exercise, empowered by a doxological attitude, we will come to know the mind of Christ, as subject of our exegetical efforts. Hans Boersma calls this ‘sacramental biblical interpretation’ as it was practiced as such by the Church Fathers. For them, he says, the meaning of the Bible ‘is not what we arrive at through some universally accessible scientific method. Such an approach mistakenly reduces exegesis to a purely historical discipline, ignoring the very subject matter that exegesis is meant to bring to the fore. Exegesis is in the first place a theological discipline: it aims to place before us the God we know in Jesus Christ. Historical investigation simply is not suitable for that task’ (Boersma 2017, p. 51).

Furthermore, as the contemporary Orthodox theologian John Behr rightly points out, ‘in the material which comes to be collected together as the canonical New Testament, reflection on Christ is an exegetical enterprise. But, it is very important to note that it is Christ who is being explained through the medium of Scripture, not Scripture itself that is being exegeted: the object is not to understand the “original meaning” of an ancient text, as in modern historical-critical scholarship, but to understand Christ himself, who, by being explained “according to the Scriptures” becomes the sole subject of Scripture throughout—he is the Word of God’ (Behr 2001).

If the aim of our hermeneutical effort is to understand and partake in the mind of the crucified and resurrected Lord, who is both divine and human, our reading and interpretation of the Scripture—the equally divine and human word of God—has to be conducted in a Christological manner. Gregory Boyd calls this ‘cruciform hermeneutic’ or ‘the principle of cruciform accommodation as divine response to human limitation’. He

defines this principle in the following way: ‘In the process of God “breathing” the written witness to his covenantal faithfulness, God sometimes displayed his triune, cruciform agape-love by stooping to accommodate his self-revelation to the fallen and culturally conditioned state of his covenant people’ (Boyd 2017, p. 644).

Since the limited space of this text does not allow us to deal with the many instances that illustrate this principle in the Bible, we will give just one example, which describes the hermeneutical process that takes us from the condescension of God in engaging with the fallen human condition to the necessity of acquiring the mind of Christ. Mathew 18:3–9 contrasts Moses’s injunctions on divorce (as found in the sacred text of the Law) and Christ’s high view of the sanctity of marriage. Jesus makes clear that some things in the inspired text of the Bible are there not because they express the final and perfect will of God for his people but as an expression of temporary condescension to the human condition. This is a powerful illustration of the principle that when interpreting and applying the Scripture, we need to pay serious attention, under the guidance of the Spirit, to the extent to which what is written reflects the limitations of the human authors and the original recipients of that particular instance of revelation.

The acceptance of the reality of the Scripture as an expression of divine temporary accommodation to the human fallenness requires a certain degree of hermeneutical humility; we may even call it a *kenosis*, which asks us to come down from the ‘high horses’ of our power of reason in dealing with any text, including the holy writ. It may also require for us to re-examine our supposedly ‘high view of Scripture’, which, at closer look, may prove to be just a sophisticated and hypocritical mask for our Docetic view of the Bible, which, despite our legitimate desire to uphold the sanctity of the divine dimension of the sacred text, nevertheless obscures, if not completely obliterates, its human dimension, thus unwittingly affecting its intended and unavoidable dual nature.

If we do not do this, we risk reducing the complex and colourful three-dimensional text of the Christian Scripture to a simplistic black-and-white two-dimensional reality. This will lend us to read and interpret the Scripture in more or less literalist, fundamentalist manner, in the way that Muslims treat the text of the Koran. That would make us guilty of the sin of bibliolatry, a risk that evangelicals, it seems to us, have rarely taken seriously enough.

The proper attention to the human dimension of the Scripture could help us to appreciate the fascinating diversity produced by the human authors of the Holy Book. The Bible, as it is, inspired by the Holy Spirit, came from the pens of fragile human authors living in different times (spanning over a thousand years), with various cultural and educational backgrounds (educated in Egypt, Babylon, or Jerusalem), as well as diverse social conditions (from peasants to kings) and men (and possibly women?) with different temperaments (impetuous and energetic, like Peter; melancholic and mystical, like John; or rational and depressive, like Paul, to give just a few New Testament examples).

To all this, we need to add the complexity of the canonisation processes, with their meanders, hesitations and limitations, and the role played not only by ecclesial authorities, such as the Church Fathers, for example, but also by the ecclesial communities that they were serving. To neglect these differences and the richness that they bring to the sacred Christian text would mean to degrade the Scripture. It would be an act of pure impiety.

One major implication of this understanding of revelation and the Scripture in the contemporary world is the need for interdisciplinary engagement in any epistemological endeavour. Because the world and human creativity are part of God’s creation, theologians need to humbly listen to and engage in dialogue with other domains, such as science and the arts. At certain times in history, when theology becomes stale and loses its prophetic edge, as it seems to be the case today, God may speak to us more clearly through poets and scientists, rather than through theologians and religious leaders.

The exploration of the ‘kenotic’ engagement with the Bible as an equally divine and human reality brings the concept of tradition to the forefront of our discussion, since the interpretation of the Scripture should not be a mere individualistic exercise. It requires the engagement of the ecclesial community, both synchronically and diachronically, as

the necessary hermeneutical context for the proper understanding and application of the Scripture in the process of our transformation under the guidance of the Spirit into the likeness of Christ.

A particular dimension of the hermeneutical process is brought to the light by Nicholas Lash's idea on the need for an existential and experiential *performance* of the Scripture in real life. This is a process in which both common believers and experts have a role to play. Lash explains that 'Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in the *performance* of texts which are construed as "rendering", bearing witness to one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, "rendered" the truth of God in human history. The performance of the New Testament enacts the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God' (Lash 1982, p. 471).

Again, this is an aspect of the hermeneutical process that has often been neglected by the evangelicals because of individualist spirit that dominates this Christian tradition, born in the wake of modernity. The ecclesial dimension of the hermeneutical process discussed here brings about the necessary humility of the individual exegete and of the Church Community involved in the process of understanding God's word.

Since the Word was initially addressed to the community of the faithful (mostly Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament), we are expected to engage with the Bible not as individual monads but as members of the faithful community, being ready to admit to our own personal blindness and to the limitations of the vantage point of our own community, as well as being willing to learn and be enriched by the way in which the Spirit has illumined in other Christian communities, both in history (which we call Tradition) and at the present time.

We find it refreshing that a very recent evangelical document, The Seoul Statement, despite its obvious limitations, affirms very clearly the need to 'read the Bible faithfully by remaining connected to tradition'. Indeed, in point 22, the statement says 'We affirm that evangelical (gospel-centred) interpretation of the Bible is not a recent development. It continues the long interpretive tradition that stretches back to the apostolic church. Faithful interpretation of the Scripture belongs to the universal church and calls for a conversation of Christians from different contexts—regional, historical, and denominational—in search of gospel unity amidst diversity. We affirm the necessary and positive role of tradition which passes on a continuity of faithful reading from past generations who were led by the same Spirit and believed in the same gospel of Jesus Christ through the same Scriptures. For an evangelical approach to interpretation to be faithful, it must honour this tradition and let it be a Spirit-enabled guide in our reading of the Bible' (Lausanne 2024).

This dimension of the process entails not only an intellectual effort (the sacrificial mind) but also an ethical one (the sacrificial living), which culminates in doxology, both individually and liturgically (the sacrificial spirituality). For these dimensions, we turn our attention to the last section of our discussion.

4. Preaching the Scripture for the Transformation of Humanity and the World

Despite the criticisms of the parallelism between Christ and the Scripture within the incarnational model, there are authors who argue that it is an important theological tool that can be productive in terms of the way that we understand the Bible and the impact that it can have in the lives of believers (de S. Cameron 1985; Enns 2007). This model can be helpful and transformative for the way that we talk about God and how we understand his presence with us in the world. As Enns puts it, 'as distant as God may seem, and as distant as we sometimes try to keep him, Scripture itself reminds us, gently but clearly, from beginning to end, that such a posture cannot last for long. For, on every page is a reminder of how determined God is to be right there in the ups and downs of the drama of redemptive history' (Enns 2007).

Although the complex reality of God's revelation for humanity has an implicit intellectual dimension, to which we attend hermeneutically, its final aim is our transformation into the likeness of Christ, *theosis*, becoming partakers of the divine nature through grace (2

Pet. 1.4). The Church is called to preach God's truth revealed to her and to witness to it in a world in need of salvation. This is the unavoidable practical implication of revelation.

The reception and integration of the Scripture message into the lives of individual Christians and local congregations require at least two 'kenotic' types of attitudes. The first refers to an awareness of the need and a willingness to receive the message proclaimed by the Church, while the second has to do with our openness to engage willingly in the transformation process brought about in our lives under the impact of the life-giving Spirit of God. From the many aspects that should be transformed through an obedient reception of the message revealed in the Bible, we would like to suggest three important ones: ethics, personal spirituality and mission.

Classic models of spirituality begin with an awareness of and a struggle with one's passions, *askesis* (on the negative side of the process), and a cultivation of virtues (in the positive sense). That is, basically the domain of the moral life and character building; yet, it is perceived not as a struggle based on human effort only but as a synergic process, assisted by God's grace, in the Spirit. Without such a continuous ethical transformation, the next steps in the process of *theosis*—illumination and the mystic union—would be impossible. The Incarnation of the Son of God gives us a life model to follow, and the moral dimension of the Christian experience does not appear as an end in itself but as a way of life that emerges from our desire to be united with God by grace.

As St. Irenaeus emphasises, God's desire to reveal himself to us and for us to enter into communion with him is fulfilled by the invitation to become imitators of the incarnate Logos: 'for in no other way could we have learned the things of God, unless our Master, existing as the Word, had become man. Again, we could have learned in no other way than by seeing our teacher, and hearing his voice with our own ears, that, having become imitators of his works as well as doers of his words, we may have communion with him, receiving increase from the perfect one, and from him who is prior to all creation' (Irenaeus *Adv Haer* 5.1.1 [Irenaeus of Lyon 2002, p. 884]).

Although ethics and spirituality cannot be separated, personal spirituality goes beyond the sphere of ethics, involving a doxological dimension. It has to do not only with right praxis but also with right worship. That, certainly, includes collective worship as an essential dimension of spirituality. However, the process also requires cultivating the personal spirituality of the believer, expressed by practices like the reading of the Bible, prayer, and the promotion of ecological and social justice. In both of these, the Scripture plays an essential role. When individual spirituality and community worship are 'married', the impact of these on the process of our transformation in the likeness of Christ is multiplied infinitely. Christian spirituality thus involves having an approach to the Scripture as the real and concrete presence of the divine Logos in the Christian's life, as Origen points out. Spirituality, as a transforming experience of God's presence with the human being in the world, has as an essential foundation the believer's encounter with Christ in his Word in the reading of the Scripture.

The third practical dimension involved in the process of transformation is that of the Christian responsibility for witnessing to Christ in a world that needs his saving grace. The Incarnation of the Son of God provides a model for Christian mission through the same idea of following the Jesus model. He declared about himself that he was sent by the Father into the world and therefore the disciples were also sent by him to continue and fulfil his mission (Jn. 20:21). Such a responsibility involves not just the witness of presence (either liturgically or individually, through our transformed sacrificial service in the community) but also active witness, through sharing the Gospel, engagement in social justice and care for creation initiatives.

It is our conviction that our engagement in *missio Dei*, far from being a secondary disposable dimension of the life of the Church, is an essential component and the culmination of our call to co-labour in God's 'plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth' (Eph. 1:10).

5. Conclusions

The rediscovery of the scriptural mind should be a crucial undertaking for the contemporary church. As we have argued in this text, this process could be enriched when it is rooted in a comprehensive theology of the Incarnation, viewed as a parallel for understanding the equally divine and human nature of the Scripture. Such an approach is possible because just as the Logos took on human form, the Word of God became incarnate in the humanly framed written text of the Bible.

This model of Incarnation requires a ‘kenotic’ approach to the Scripture, whereby the readers recognise their own limitations and allow the Spirit to illumine the text. We must move beyond a simplistic and literalist reading and adopt a Christological hermeneutic of a ‘cruciform’ nature, seeking to encounter the living Lord revealed in the sacred writings.

The task is not straightforward, as it requires an unremitting effort to resist the temptations of bibliological Docetism and liberalism, in addition to the need for overcoming our deeply ingrained habits and cultural biases. This hermeneutical humility must then bear fruit in the transformation of the believer’s ethics, spirituality and missional commitment.

The restoration of the scriptural mind implies not only an intellectual understanding of the biblical content but also a complete reorientation of the human person and the community of the faithful towards Christ in response to the inner work of the Holy Spirit. By receiving and integrating the Gospel message, the faithful will be conformed to the image of the Incarnate Son and become, by God’s grace, ‘partakers of the divine nature’. In this manner, the Church can fulfil its call to faithfully preach the Word and bear witness to God’s saving work in a world in need of redemption. The restoration of the scriptural spirit, based on the model of Incarnation, offers a prospect of hope for the Church, for society and for the world.

Author Contributions: Writing—original draft, D.M. and D.J.; Writing—review and editing, D.M. and D.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in this article; further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

- Behr, John. 2001. The Paschal Foundations of Christian Theology. *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 45: 115–36.
- Boersma, Hans. 2017. *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church*. Ada: Baker Academic.
- Boyd, Gregory A. 2017. *Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament’s Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Brown, Candy Gunther, and Mark Silk, eds. 2016. *The Future of Evangelicalism in America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- de S. Cameron, Nigel M. 1985. Incarnation and Inscripturation: The Christological Analogy in the Light of Recent Discussions. *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3: 35–46.
- Elliot, Mark, Kenneth Atkinson, and Robert Rezetko, eds. 2023. *Misusing Scripture. What Are Evangelicals Doing with the Bible?* New York: Routledge.
- Enns, Peter. 2007. Preliminary Observations on an Incarnational Model of Scripture: Its Viability and Usefulness. *Calvin Theological Journal* 42: 219–36.
- Ephrem the Syrian. 2015. *Hymns on Faith*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Florovsky, George. 1951. *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*. Belmont: Norland Publishing Company.
- Gushee, David P. 2020. *After Evangelicalism*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Ignatius of Antioch. 2002. The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians. In *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Translated and Edited by Phillip Schaff. Electronic Version. Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library.
- Irenaeus of Lyon. 2002. Against Heresies. In *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. Translated and Edited by Phillip Schaff. Electronic Version. Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library.
- Lash, Nicholas. 1982. Performing the Scriptures: Interpretation through Living. *The Furrow* 33: 467–74.

- Lausanne. 2024. The Seoul Statement. Available online: <https://lausanne.org/statement/the-seoul-statement> (accessed on 26 September 2024).
- Maximus the Confessor. 1981. Two Hundred Chapters on Theology. In *The Philokalia*. London: Faber and Faber, vol. II.
- Origen. 1911. *The Philokalia of Origen*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
- Origen. 1990. *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Putman, Rhyne R. 2015. *In Defense of Doctrine. Evangelicalism, Theology, and Scripture*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- Weinandy, Thomas. 1993. *In the Likeness of the Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.