

The Prologue of John: A Conceptual Framework for African Public Theological Discourse

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Abstract

One of the recurring concerns in public theology is the possibility of arriving at a normative methodology. Some are of the opinion that a normative methodology is not necessary, while others think it matters and have proposed normative methodologies of their own. Furthermore, some think it matters but the nature of “public” and “theology” are too diverse to have a normative method since each context has rights to its preferred methodology. Be that as it may, having a methodology requires a known goal. Many public theologians agree, the goal of public theology is the transformative progress of the society from where it presently is to where it should be, according to God’s standard. In other words, the goal of public theology is the same as the goal of Christian theology (Moltmann 1999). Over the history of the Church, the concept of the Word of God becoming flesh

(*Logos* incarnation) has had a major impact on the self-understanding of Christianity. Therefore, this study revisits the prologue of John where the incarnation is explicitly stated. Taking its cue from the impact it has had on Christian theology in general, the aim of such revisit is to investigate the passage and see what hope it provides in an attempt to propose a normative methodology for doing public theology, particularly in Africa. This undertaking assumes that the prologue of John is significant for the entire enterprise of Christian theology, and so applies it to public theology. This study assumes as important that there is an anchor for the goal of public theology. African public theology needs a normative method. This paper uses a literary methodology and engages literature on public theology, in dialogue with an exegetical analysis of the prologue

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of John (1:1–18). It argues strongly that God’s invasion of human history in the incarnation gives an enduring hermeneutical springboard, a defining model for carrying out the goal of public theology in a normative fashion.

1. Introduction

Hendriks (2016, 8–14), in attempting a model of how the Church should understand her public theological role, stresses the self-emptying of Christ in order to reach out to those suffering. Musa (2020, 29), though not disagreeing with Hendriks, emphasizes how the principles sourced from the law in the Pentateuch should still model the Church’s thinking in doing public theology today. In explaining how Jesus can be seen to be in sync with his model he says, “Jesus provided an example of how this should be done in his Sermon on the Mount, in which he penetrated to the heart of the law and taught Christians how to focus on what God desires and to be perfect as God is perfect (Matt 5:48).”

It can be argued that the goal of public theology is a phenomenon in process partly due to the nature of public theology itself and the diverse contexts in which it is done (Forster 2020, 15ff.; Day and Kim 2017, 5, 10). Smit (2017, 67) puts it in sharp language when he says, “There is hardly any agreement on what constitutes public theology.” Yet, as most public theologians have acknowledged, the goal of public theology is the same as the goal of Christian theology (Forster [2020, 16] quoting Moltmann;), 16; Smit comments on Russel Botman, 2017, 67–68). According to Moltmann (1999, 1), “There is no Christian identity without public relevance, and no public relevance without theology’s Christian identity.” At the center of this goal, at least for the Christian, lies the quest for an experiential reach for what God has reached man for (Agang 2020, 3–5; cf. Phil 3:12). Many public theologians have labored and are laboring in light of this.

Day and Kim (2017, 10) postulate that public theology will always be indebted to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who emphasized the grounding of any Christian theology in the exemplary incarnation of the Word made flesh (Bonhoeffer 1963, 277ff.; cf. John 1:14). The relevance of the incarnation of Jesus for public theology has been acknowledged. However, in Africa the relevance of the incarnation of the *Logos* in John’s Gospel for public theology has not been given the attention it is due.

It is appropriate to agree with Smit (2017, 67–68) that no normative methodology has yet been arrived at. Smit is right when he says that the question of whether it matters should be dropped. But as a working central motif can be discerned, as stated above, a continuous quest for a normative method is never out of place. This contribution seeks to call attention to what can be sieved from John’s *Logos* incarnation. The article is premised on the idea that a normative method via a model may not be far from reach after all. This takes its cue from the impact John’s *Logos* incarnation (John 1:1–18) has had on the understanding of Christianity as a whole.

Therefore, this contribution revisits the prologue of John, centering on his idea of the *Logos* incarnation. This contribution sees this passage as a model dialogue passage for Christians in Africa’s public squares as they engage their immediate spaces with their identities. For, as Bonhoeffer (1963, 277) stated, “A truth, a doctrine, or a religion need no space for themselves. They are disembodied entities. They are heard, learnt and apprehended.” An incarnation not limited to an event of the past or the present, “but as an ongoing embodiment of God in those who follow Christ” (Behr 2019, viii). The Church is Christ’s active incarnation in society. What follows then is a theological reading of the prologue of John in an attempt at locating a conceptual framework for the grounding of a normative methodology for public theology in Africa. Afterwards some concluding

theological reflections are drawn, demonstrating the implication of such a framework.

2. John—Jesus is God Enfleshed

Without apology, John bluntly wrote,

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.... The word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1–4, 14 NIV)

On this passage, Dunn (1989, 213) notes,

Few if any passages have been so influential on subsequent theology. For it was the *Logos* (Word) concept, the explicit affirmation of the incarnation of the *Logos*, and the identification of Jesus as the incarnate *Logos* which dominated the Christology of the second and third centuries.

The obsession and preoccupation of second- and third-century ecclesial Christological discourse is, perhaps, due in part to the difficulty in understanding the mystery surrounding the person and the divinity of Christ. Lewis (2004, 122) is correct when he says, “The philosophically unthinkable became fact. While philosophers were seeking to escape the ‘flesh’ and be free in ‘spirit,’ God who is Spirit becomes flesh.” The profundity of John’s epigram is breath-taking. Kim (2009, 421) puts it well, “THE

PROLOGUE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL, (John 1:1–18) is one of the most profound passages in all of Scripture. It is crafted with unparalleled literary beauty while also possessing unique theological depth.” Even though Johannine scholars have different persuasions on the message of the Fourth Gospel, they agree on the centrality of the prologue in Christian theology as a whole. Especially that it is cardinal to understanding the incarnation and making groundings for the subsequent understanding of the Trinity—the Christian presentation of God (Bultmann 1971; Dunn 1989; Hurtado 2003; Ashton 2014; Carson 1991; Joy 2010; Behr 2019).

The uniqueness of John can even be pictured thus: John’s perception of Jesus Christ stems in part to this leaning, for while all the other apostles would either be busy eating the meal served or be busy listening to Jesus’s teaching, John would be at the side of Christ leaning (John 13: 23, 25; 21:20). Obviously, this place of intimacy helped John not only to listen to the teachings but to also hear and know the heartbeat of Christ, and thus be able to perceive and present him in the fashion no one ever did.

The focus in this article is to investigate John’s insight into the life and person of Jesus Christ as enshrined in the prologue and the work he feels Christ has achieved and its implication for African Christian public life. Doing that demands that we seek first to recover as far as possible John’s perception of Jesus Christ and why he passionately and bluntly brought to the fore the concept of the *Logos* as the means God chose to reveal himself to fallen mankind. This, to my mind, is the hub around which his *Logos* Christology revolves.

The majestic statement by John in his prologue echoes the opening words of Genesis 1:1. Carson’s (1991, 113) influential comment on this epigram is worthy of quotation. He states, “In the beginning immediately reminds any reader of the Old Testament of the opening verse of the Bible.” The similarity in construction between Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1 is

brehtaking. While Genesis 1:1 lays down a blueprint, John 1:1 gives the commentary. It is interesting to note that John's subject in his commentary is the incarnate Word of God. John traces Christ back to Genesis and tells us that he is the self-existent God who created everything from the beginning (Gen 1:1–3; cf. John 1:1). This same Creator, John argues, has made his dwelling among humans (1:14). The surest evidence of God taking abode with humans is his glory (*δόξα*; 1:14b) taking up habitation among them. The Son displayed the character of the Father above. He was full of grace and truth (1:14c).

This startling declaration, that Christ is the incarnate *Logos* and Creator, is illuminating, transforming and unparalleled. John also tells us that Christ is the long-awaited Messiah (John 1:11–12; 3:16; 20:31; 1 John 5:11–12; Rev 22:12–16) who gives his life for us and for our salvation (3:36; 1 John 5:12). John's unique portrayal of Christ as the incarnate *Logos*, that gives a vivid picture of who Christ is, is in line with the rest of Scripture (20:31, cf. Mark 1:1; Luke 2:11) and this has led to the transformation of lives around the world. Early North-African Church Fathers like Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine also experienced the transforming power of Christ as they dwelled on the works of John. Their understanding of Christ, as revealed in their works, has also transformed many lives in Africa.

3. John's Prologue

In the Church's history, "revelation" has meant the self-disclosure of God to man. The medium of God's self-disclosure is in revelation shrouded in the incarnation. The incarnation is packaged in Jesus Christ and through Scripture (John 3:16; 5:39; 14:9; 1 Tim 3:16). God uses these channels to speak to our forefathers in the past and these latter days by his Son (Heb 1:1–2). John's notion of the Son as the Word is the beginning point for *Logos* Christology which served as a crucial phase in early Christianity's

attempt to explain itself. It was important for early Christians to prove their movement as the right continuation of true religion traced back at least to Abraham, and to come to a coherent understanding and statement of its faith concerning Christ (Dunn 1989, 213).

Regardless of its diverse interpretations of what constitutes right observance of the Law of God, Judaism has always had a uniting ground in its claim of being a monotheistic religion, and the same was the case in the first century CE (Ashton 2014, 1–2; cf. Evans 1993). Christianity, which sprang from Judaism, made the radical claim that it was the fulfilment of the prophecies of Judaism. As such, it carried the burden of proving that it was not a heresy. There was such tension that Jews expelled Christians from their synagogues at some points, which drew a fundamental line that divided them (Ashton 2014, 2; Evans 1993, 168 ff.).

[It is] fundamentally because the two religions, though both profess belief in one God, have completely opposed conceptions of God's definitive revelation to humankind. For the Jews this can be summed up as the Torah, the law revealed to Moses. For the Christians it is summed up in the very person of Christ. (Ashton 2014, 2)

According to Dunn (1989, xxviii; cf. Hurtado 1998, 11–14) this carved the unique response of John, explaining how Christians are right to claim they are disciples of Jesus even to the point of worship, and that at the same time they are not violating the monotheism that is inherent in the OT. Against this backdrop, John used *Logos* or Word to reveal the mystery of the incarnation—the Christian belief that "God has now made himself known by the entry of Jesus Christ, His eternal Word, into the world" (St Helen's, Bishopgate 2008, 25).

4. *Logos*: Origin and Scope

The background to the *Logos* concept and its use in the prologue of John's Gospel has been discussed vigorously many times (e.g., Dunn 1989, 215; Behr 2019, 245). Here we limit discussion to two schools of thought on the origin of the *Logos* concept as used by John in his prologue, that of Dunn and Bultmann respectively.

The principal background for the origin of *Logos* in the investigation of Dunn (1980, 258 ff.) is traced back to the Old Testament, particularly in the Inter-Testament Hellenistic Judaism obtained in the wisdom literature of that era in which the figure of wisdom receives considerable prominence. Painter and Dodd (n.d., 50) share this same opinion. According to them, John's "starting point was the Jewish, or early Christian use of the term. He began with the Hellenistic Jewish identification of *Logos* with Torah/wisdom." This original context though does not imply, for example, that there could not have been any external factor at influence. That the context is "Hellenistic Judaism" already rules out that the original context was strictly Jewish.

Rudolf Bultmann (1971, 13–15), on the other hand, writing before Dunn, Painter, and Dodd, attributed the origin of the *Logos* concept to a pre-Christian Gnostic myth. While he acknowledges that the Fourth Gospel shows an acquaintance with the Synoptic Gospels and Pauline background thinking (6–10), he nevertheless sees the original context of the prologue as gnostic. For him, "The background is an early oriental Gnosticism, already under the influence of Old Testament belief in God as Creator.... John thus, uses gnostic language and conceptuality of the gospel." This assertion has been rejected by Dunn and many Johannine scholars (cf. Evans 1993, 7) who hold that such a view is untenable because, as it is, the trace of a gnostic pre-Christian *Logos* myth cannot be substantiated (Dunn 1989, 215).

Thus, to pin down the origin of the *Logos* concept to a particular

background, Kim (2009, 425) contends, is to leave out some essential aspect of its roots. For him, "There is no consensus on the antecedent or background of the *λόγος*." He maintains further, "Proposals for its conceptual background can be broadly classified into three sources: (a) Greek and Philosophy (Stoicism and Philo), (b) the "Word" as the personification of Wisdom in Jewish wisdom literature (*σωφία*), and (c) the word of God in the Old Testament" (425–426).

Some have even gone further, asking whether the origin of the prologue lies with John, or whether he only adopted an existing hymn offering some editorial work to fit it into his purpose (Behr 2019, 245; cf. Bultmann 1971, 18 commenting on Burnley's hypothesis of movements from Aramaic into Greek, assuming John wrote in Greek). Although there are many ideas regarding the backgrounds and origin of the prologue, all the different voices agree that it contains a profound message. The article next inspects the message.

4.1 *History and Tradition*

Picking up from Kim's comment above, Harris (1994) noted that Johannine scholars have not been able to prove beyond reasonable doubt whether the background to John's use of *Logos* is strictly Jewish or Greek, since the *Logos* concept has both Jewish and Greek sources. Notwithstanding its background, Harris postulated that John had in mind three main emphases for using *Logos* in his writing:

First, John 1:1 outlines the relationship of the Word to God. John 1:1a (in the beginning was the Word) forms a clear statement of pre-existence. John 1:1b (the Word was with God) distinguishes God (the Father) from the Word.... John 1:1c (and the Word was God) affirms the full deity of the Word. Second, John 1:3 gives

the relationship of the word to creation: “through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that had been made.” Third, John 1:14 shows the relationship of the Word to humanity: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (Harris 1994, 191–192)

The following paragraphs will briefly discuss Harris’s three categorizations of prologue—namely, the being of the Word, his relationship with creation, and his relationship with humanity.

4.1.1 The Being of the Word

On the first verse of the prologue, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1 NIV),” Harris (1994, 191–192) comments that the statement of the beginning forms a clear statement of the pre-existence of the Word. That is, whatever the Word is, it has always been. For readers familiar with Judaism this is the same as saying that the Word is equal to God—for only God possesses this quality.

Harris (1994, 191–192) goes on to draw a distinction, however, between the Word and God as he introduced the ripple concept of the Father. But as the verse concludes by merging the seeming gap between the Word and God, Harris explained this as expressing the deity of the Word without obliterating the Word’s pre-existence and distinction from God (the Father). This presents the reader with a difficulty. How could Christianity claim to be a monotheistic religion, like Judaism, while making the *Logos* equal with God, as stated above? It is precisely to this end that Dunn (1989, xxvii ff.) labored in his *Christology in the Making*. There he cautioned firmly: “To avoid confusion, therefore, it would be better to speak of the Johannine Christ as the incarnation of *God*,” not as the incarnation of the Word. This

sets a precedent that, whatever the distinction might be, it does not invoke a distinct God (Father) co-existing with the Word, so that Christianity is some form of bitheism (Dunn 1989, xxxi). In plain terms, the incarnation is what made the Word of God, who is God, become Jesus Christ (Dunn 1989, xxxi)—Jesus is God enfleshed.

4.1.2 Relationship with creation

The Word’s becoming enfleshed does not relegate his preceding relationship with matter. John 1:3, as commented by Harris (1994, 191–192), gives us the relationship that existed and still was in existence at the incarnation: “through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that had been made (1:1 NIV).” The God-Creation motif is an enormous one to tackle, but it is sufficient for our purpose to summarily consider God distinct from what he has made. That the Word is the one *through* whom creation came to be is “[a] poetical description of divine immanence, of God’s self-revelation and interaction with his creation and his people; it was a way of speaking of *divine agency* rather than of *divine agent* distinct from God in ontological terms” (Dunn 1989, 240). Thus, never de-emphasizing that the Word is something other than what created the creation—God himself.

4.1.3 Relationship with Humanity

Before verse 14 of the prologue, we read that the Word is the light that gives light to every human in the world (1:9). The function of this light to mankind (part of the creation *by* the Word) is the imprinting of the purpose of existence on mankind. This also indicates that it is only through the Word that man has life and understands what life is meant for. Dunn (1989, 242) puts it thus, “[it is] the vivifying power and revelation of God, as God giving life and revealing how that life should be lived.” And this stands at the center of the whole incarnation story: the communication of

the meaning of life to God's creatures.

It is at this point of communication of what life is that verse 14 paints its picture of the Creator becoming one with his creation in the symbol of man, Jesus Christ. A claim unparalleled either in Jewish or Greek thought (Dunn 1989, 243), thus initiating an innovation to the usage of *Logos* not heard before and now uniquely appropriated by Christians. In Dunn's words:

If it had asserted simply that an individual divine being had become man, that would have raised fewer eyebrows. It is the fact that the *Logos* poet has taken language which any thoughtful Jew would recognize to be the language of personification and has *identified* it with a particular person, *as* a particular person ... the manifestation of God becoming a man! God's utterance does not merely come through a particular individual, but actually becomes that one person, Jesus of Nazareth! (Dunn 1989, 243)

Thus, the incarnation of the *Logos* is central to the Christian identity. Without it, there is no purpose to living other than groping around in the utter darkness that the world is in (cf. John 1:5, 10–11). Our question now remains. Our aim is to demonstrate how this incarnation story, that as Christians we believe is what has forged our identity and its ensuing purpose, should be the ultimate springboard for the Church's engagement with the society at large as we go barefooted into the field of public theology. We start with some reflections on how this has been the case even right from the early centuries of the Church.

5. Christology as “Churchiality”

If Christ so incarnated himself, and if we agree with Philip Melancthon's powerful statement “To know his acts of kindness is to know Christ,”

(Zamoyta 1967, 169), then, we have to agree with Gonzalez (1987). He insightfully declares,

The purpose of this incarnation of the Son of God is to free us from the power of the Devil and to show us the way of salvation, Christ achieves his victory over the Devil throughout the totality of his life, but most especially in his incarnation and his death. In his incarnation, Christ invaded the dominions of the Devil, and thereby began his victorious work. But it was in his death that Satan himself, being fooled by the seeming weakness of the Savior, introduced him into the deepest shadows of his empire, where Christ defeated him in returning victoriously from among the dead. Since then, all the dead who wish to do so may follow him, thereby escaping the claws of death and of its master Satan. (Gonzalez 1987, 223)

Christology is a product and activity of the Church rooted in apostolic proclamation and patristic doctrinal confession and formulation. The conciliar formulations—some of which became known as the Apostles' Creed, for example, gave defining conclusions that Jesus is the Christ and one co-equal, coeternal, and consubstantial with the Father. As Quasten (1995, 23) endeavored to show, “The Apostles' Creed (*Symbolum Apostolicum*) is a brief summary of the principal doctrines of Christianity ... hence may be called a compendium of the theology of the Church.” This firm resolve—contained in the Creed—is built around the fundamental fact that, after Jesus's death, the disciples were not, as one might have expected, rounded up, arrested, and perhaps executed (Wright 1996, 109).

I have argued in my work (2019), *Jesus Christ as Ancestor: A Theological Study of Major African Ancestor Christologies in Conversation with the Patristic*

Christologies of Tertullian and Athanasius, that had this happened, that would have constituted an extinction of the good news about Jesus Christ and possible witness of the apostles. But they (the disciples), frightened and doubtful as they were, lived and had daily fellowship in the upper room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:14–15; John 20:19; Acts 1:13). They devoted themselves to the apostolic teaching (Acts 2:42) and publicly witnessed to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, despite the threats coming from the religious leaders in Jerusalem (Acts 4:20).

Quintessential to apostolic proclamation is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Kereszty (2011, 22) argues, “In light of the resurrection, the Church finally understood the mystery of the crucified and risen One: ‘My Lord and my God’ Thomas cries out when the risen Jesus shows himself to him.” The resurrection of Jesus changed the perspective of the apostles thereby transforming their worldview so much that timidity was transformed into boldness. The ones who went into hiding in the upper room in Jerusalem for fear of the Roman authorities could now stand in public and boldly witness to the death and resurrection of their Lord (Acts 2:14ff.; 3:11ff.; Turbi 2019, 126). And this cause, of proclaiming Christ as the risen Lord, became the pillar upon which the Church Fathers consolidated and built their theology(ies). Thus, in the question, “Who is Jesus of Nazareth lies an impenetrable mystery.... Jesus, Son of Mary, is God existing in another way” (Zamoyta 1967, x). The foundations of the patristic response to the Christological question come from the prologue of John. As Grillmeier (1975, 26) is convinced,

The climax in the New Testament development of Christological thought is reached in John. His prologue to the Fourth Gospel is the most penetrating description of the career of Jesus Christ that has been written. It was not without reason that the

Christological formula of John 1:14 could increasingly become the most influential New Testament text in the history of dogma.

Furthermore, Grillmeier (1975, 27) postulates, “In John, Christ’s activity of revelation and redemption is represented as a dramatic descent and ascent. The course traversed by Christ begins in the heavenly world (1:1 ff.) and leads to the earthly world (1:11, 14), to the cross (19:17 ff).” The Judaic meaning of the cross as the place on which the crucified is understood to have incurred God’s curse became transformed to mean not only the wisdom and power of God, but the source of redemption in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant of promise (Deut 21:22–23; Gal 3:13–14; cf. Gen 12:2–3; Turbi 2019, 127).

Paul the apostle did not look back to his former credentials as an expert in Jewish law, but rather looked to the “surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake, I have lost all things, I have considered them rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Phil 3:8 NIV). He told the sophisticated of his day, “we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:23 NIV; Turbi 2019, 127–128). For the early Church, God’s power in Christ is demonstrated in raising him back to life after death (Acts 2:32), exalting him to his right hand (Acts 2:33; Phil 2:9a), and giving him a name that is above every name (Phil 2:9–11) as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies (Isa 45:23).

Accordingly, this crucified and exalted One is now made both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36) and Mediator of a new covenant (Heb 9:15) through whom, as our Advocate (1 John 2:1 cf. 14:16), we receive forgiveness of sin (John 1:29; Acts 13:38), grace, and truth (John 1:17). These together

led to justification from “everything you could not be justified from by the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:39 NIV). Jesus, who has become both Lord and Christ and by whom we are justified, made us more than conquerors and victors as opposed to being vanquished (Rom 8:37). He engrafted us (Rom 11:17), making us members of God’s multiracial community (Eph 2) and nation of priesthood (1 Pet 2: 9) to walk in the light as he is in the light (1 John 1:7; Turbi 2019, 127–128). This is the doxology the early church sang and lived by unwaveringly. And for me, African public theological discourse should take its cue from the apostolic and patristic periods. For the faithful in those eras, Christ was produced not only in their literature but in their songs and proverbs. And they took pride in being humiliated because of that name (Acts 5:41).

6. The Incarnation as Hermeneutical Foundation for African Public Theological Discourse

In the words of Jensen (2007, 2) hermeneutics is, “The reflection on the problem of understanding.” Jensen (2007, 2) also sees hermeneutics as “The art of *hermeneuein*, i.e., of proclaiming, translating, explaining, and interpreting.” In this light, when classical Christian theology asserts that God became flesh in the man, Jesus of Nazareth, hermeneutics was in play. Given this reasoning, the incarnation or divine self-disclosure of God in Jesus the Christ should thus be the motif for acceptable African Christian life in the public square. In the incarnation, God in Christ, demonstrated the highest moral standard in life. Jesus taught righteousness and called upon people to do the same (Matt 3:15). He illustrates in the Beatitudes the highest ethical principles and taught the “light and salt lesson” to show how Christians ought to live in society (Matt 5). He reached out to the poor and needy of his society. By reason of his social engagement, especially with the

masses at the grassroots, he was called a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners” (Luke 7:34).

In the incarnation, Christ raised the dead and healed all manner of sicknesses and diseases (Matt 9:27–30; Mark 5:21–34). He healed the blind (Mark 8:22–25; 10:52; John 9), fed the crowds (Mark 5:42; 8:1–8), and freed the demon-possessed (Mark 5:1–8; 9:25; Luke 4:31–41; 5:1–8). His followers are his mother and brothers (Mark 3:34–35) and he invited all, including the little children, to come to him (Mark 10:13–16) and proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom to the captive, and announced the year of the Lord’s favor (Isa 61; cf. Luke 4:18). He also instituted love for all—including your enemies (Luke 6:27–42; 1 John 3:11), washed his disciples’ feet (John 13), and encouraged them to believe he is the resurrection and the life and that no one goes to the Father except through him (John 11:25–26; 14:6–14). Simply put, in the incarnation, God became man, and he does not distinguish enemies and friends, poor and rich—he broke down all inequalities and social barriers. By virtue of the incarnation, many of “the poor” of his day were able to find restoration and succor from alienating social, cultural, religious, political, and economic structures.

Considering this, this article proposes that the incarnation should be the theological expression and solution to the experience of the African context. In Africa there is an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor, leading to depression and destitution. For this reason, I argue that Jesus’s activities in the incarnation should be used to deconstruct Africa’s current alienating socioeconomic and sociopolitical structures. Africans should reconstruct structures anew, with social and distributive foci, and egalitarian justice. The African Church, by virtue of its praxis, should create socio-cohesive structures such that the saying, “During Solomon’s lifetime, Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under

his own vine and fig tree” (1 Kgs 4:25 NIV) becomes a lived reality on the continent.

African public theology should strive to see those in the upper echelons and corridors of power live within the reach of the poor and vulnerable of society. They should live out the norms of the community and offer needed help—according to the will of our Father who is in Heaven—to improve Africa’s social, political, and economic landscape (Matt 6:10). This is the theology this paper advocates—one that dislodges political and economic exploitation in favor of social and political order in which all, regardless of one’s tribal, political, religious affinity, can be accepted and belong. All this is exemplified in the incarnation. By way of resonance, Luke records this of the ministry of Jesus: “He went about doing good” (Acts 10:38 NIV). All this implies that, as God, Jesus came to actualize his kingdom among men (Matt 12:28, 41–42; John 6:26–58; 8:12–29; 10:30–38). Thus, Christ became all things to all and that is exactly what the incarnation means—God became flesh to do away with sin and societal decay. In other words, in the incarnation, God put a smile on the faces of the indigent of society and restored hope to the hopeless.

In Christ’s time and ministry, Christian life is not compartmentalized, rather, it was all about dispensing the light of the gospel replete with love, tolerance, forgiveness, and good works. To this end, Jesus’s life and ministry should provide a defining model of how life should be lived in the present-day African context in which some societies have been ravaged by Boko Haram and religious fundamentalism as well as the devastating effects of COVID-19. Against this background, this paper contends that the relevance of the message of God’s love and hope demonstrated in the incarnation (John 3:16) in the midst of these global trends cannot be overemphasized. It thus cannot be debated that, in Jesus’s time, human needs were met as Luke records in Acts 10:38ff. And this, for me, lays the

ethical basis for African public theological discourse in which civil servants, politicians, businessmen and women should “live out” their faith in public corridors since they are the light and salt of the world (Matt 5:13–16). In fact, Christ’s ethics were people and community focused. And this rhymes perfectly with African mentality, “Man, who lives on the earth, is the centre of the universe” (Mbiti 1981, 33).

Since one overriding emphasis in Africa is life in the community, it is legitimate to argue that our theology should reflect the fact that we are community oriented and people focused. If an incarnation approach is taken, we would not wait until global pandemics like HIV and Aids, Lassa Fever, and COVID-19 strike before dishing out palliatives, which would be construed as eyeservice. Essential lifesaving services, development, and empowerment should be the watchword and passion of our politicians and the well-to-do in society. For that is what the incarnation epitomizes—a demonstration of love and mercy to all. This means, we must fight against nepotism, tribalism, and godfatherism that have come to be the norm in most African societies. Simply put, the incarnation should be the one cardinal norm of operation for Christian politicians and civil servants. As Christ got involved with the poor and needy, so they should, likewise, ensure they dispense the democratic dividends to the masses at the grassroots through building modern infrastructure, the supply of good drinking water, and public conveniences for the common good. The theological imperative and justification for active involvement with their society is simple—everything was made by and for Christ, everything holds together in Christ, and everything will be reconciled by Christ (Col 1:15–20). His saints therefore need to emulate Jesus’s praxis on the planet earth by participating with theological integrity derived from a biblical worldview in tune with divine wisdom modeled in the incarnation (Turbi 2020, 122).

7. The Incarnation as a Catalyst for the African Church's Involvement in Politics

Politics in Africa is as significant as human existence. The constant overlap between religion and politics is so significant in the continent that ignoring it is almost synonymous with ignoring the existence of the sun that shines on all.

Consequently, this paper takes a leaf from the compendium by Agan, Forster, and Hendriks (*African Public Theology* 2020) in consistently engendering the application of biblical principles in public spaces and other spheres of influence so as to create an Africa that is reflective of God's glory. But then, I propose that it also needs legitimization, and the Johannine *Logos* prologue offers such a legitimization. The *Logos* who was not of this world, became one of us. And what makes this much more remarkable is that *Logos* was described as resisting and even overpowering the darkness (John 1:5). African Theology and praxis must begin to see Christians living in Africa take this stance. We must first imitate Christ and begin to shift our focus from the pilgrim concept to one that seeks to occupy various sociological niches, resisting and overpowering the seeming darkness engulfing Africa, especially through the auspices of poor leadership and jungle politics. Like the *Logos*, it is high time we incarnate in these problematic spheres and shine the light there by participating in accordance with Evangelical tradition derived from biblical worldview.

According to Yamsat (2001, 4), Aristotle said that politics is, "about the study of happiness and about working out how this happiness should be secured for the good of a given society." Yamsat's assertion implies that politics is meant to be used for the common good of every citizen of every given nation. Quite unfortunately, however, the opposite is the common practice of politics in Africa. The wrong and selfish usage of politics is

clearly seen as practiced by countless politicians, for whom politics has become an instrument for relegating the masses who, ironically, are also their electorate. This is a gross negation of the principles of the incarnation. For this reason, this paper calls for sincere and regenerated Christians to be actively involved in politics representing the interest of the Church and masses. Canvassing for Christians' involvement in politics, Yamsat (2001) traces the Christians' right of politics to the Scriptures. He alleges,

The Holy Bible does not leave us in doubt about the nature of church involvement in political government. It need not be over-emphasized that freedom or democratic rights originates from God, it is his creation, right back to the origin of creation, as we read in Genesis 1:28. The first set of human beings, Adam and Eve were created in his image and created with freedom, freedom to govern the universe and all God's creation. (Yamsat 2001, 13)

Kafang (2011, 20) believes that for Christians, and especially the Church, separating politics and religion is a serious mistake. He writes, "From a biblical point of view, this dualistic distinction between church and the world, between the sacred and the secular, is mistaken. Christ is Lord of the whole world, over every dimension of creation."

This political and divine right granted to man by virtue of being created in God's image brings the Church into the political picture. As such, it is the Church's divine duty to teach and train her members how to do politics that glorify God and are beneficial to humanity, and this is the perfect link with the incarnation—God in Christ was involved with the society and politics of his day. So, the Church in Africa should not do less. As we are convinced, once the Church is involved in the socioeconomic and sociopolitical structures of the day, Christian values will also be entrenched, and thus influence

how things are done on the social and political fronts. In consequence, this paper argues that it is the Church's sole duty to teach and train Christian politicians for the Lord. By doing so, politics and politicians in the Christian domain would be transformed and yield the anticipated result which is to glorify God. These politicians are not just to get the Church's attention only when it is time for the Church's endless projects which are usually to get funds from them. The Church can achieve this by way of organizing seminars purposely for political training. And by so doing, the Church would be in a better position to not only know these Christian politicians, but also have the capacity to call them to account each time they err. Kafang (2011, 21) proposes, "Christians must create awareness, be informed citizens, and raise the conscience of their members through seminars, workshops, publications and the like." Furthermore, Kafang is convinced that "Our personal piety and heart-deep dedication to Jesus Christ should work their way out in the way we seek to obey God with all the political responsibilities as public officials and as citizens" (cf. Esth 1–9; Dan 1–12). Yamsat (2001, 40) keenly notes,

The church should be the power deciding which Christian is qualified to go on political quest, the church should be the one to recommend and send any political candidate veering for any political position. If those in political leadership or in positions of authority are instituted by God, then it is important that we know who and who are being called by him into those positions of leadership. It also means that the church should be interested in knowing who and who God is calling into these positions of authority. For how can the church support and bless those elected into offices of authority when they have not supported them right from the choosing processes? That is why it makes sense to say

that the church should make sure that it is only those whom it believes are called and have the gift, get to the throne.

As difficult and seemingly unattainable as this sounds, it is the right thing to do, and it is doable. Every Christian politician is a member of a particular local church and as well under the authority of the Church, hence the Church's leadership has the power to make it happen. This brings Christianity into the fore of politics, hence, empowering Christianity with the needed power to stop all forms of marginalization from wherever and bring emancipation in the very manner that Jesus did during his earthly ministry.

It is critical to state further that the Church's political training should not be strictly about the present serving politicians, including the church members. Church members need to know their political and civic rights, be aware of their responsibilities as citizens, and also need to be taught how to support leaders, as well as call them to accountability (Rom 13). This also prepares intending politicians to be aware of the Church's role in their prospective political intentions.

The last point brings all theological institutions and seminaries into the picture. The sole aim and objective of African theological institutions is to raise godly church leaders for the Church and society (cf. Madimbo 2020, 349). This is achieved by many relevant courses offered in these institutions which are geared towards producing quality and contemporary African church leaders. Theological institutions beyond just teaching the theology of public policy, should not leave the training of politicians only to secular universities. They should have a political science department in the faculty of theology whose sole aim is to raise godly future politicians. This can be done just as the other various departments do with relevant courses. Romans 13:1–2 says, "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that

exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgement on themselves” (NIV).

This verse has political meaning for all Christians in Africa, and it is the Church’s duty to teach this political meaning to all members. This Scripture simply states that all authorities, including the ones we naturally detest, including non-Christians in authorities, are established by God. Therefore, it is our civic responsibility and divine order not to rebel against them since it implies rebelling against God who placed each in the seat of authority. The Church would have to teach members the meaning of this passage and also teach members to hold tight to their rights as Africans. Without the involvement of the Church in political issues in Africa, our continent will continue to suffer setbacks from the ethnic, religious, and political shenanigans, jingoism, oppression, and slavery tendencies as is the case currently in Nigeria. To halt this menace, Christians all over the continent must unite. The Church in Africa must also revisit her position on the separation between Church and state, as well step up in the fight against oppression of Christians and unwanted relegation. And of course, unity and Christian brotherhood—demonstrated in the incarnation—should be the heartbeat of the Church in Africa. This campaign is a must if the Church is to thrive in Africa.

8. Conclusion

The prologue of John in classical Christian theology draws attention to the scandal of the Word made flesh. In historic Christian tradition and belief, this is known as the incarnation, or the divine self-disclosure of God in Jesus the Christ. In consequence, the paper finds theological justification and imperative in the fact that the invasion of God in the man, Jesus of

Nazareth, lays the ethical and hermeneutical (methodological) foundation and defining model for African Christian involvements with the social and political issues of their societies. In the incarnation, God became man, and he did not distinguish enemies and friends, poor and rich—he broke down all inequalities and social barriers. The poor of his day overcame alienating social, cultural, religious, political, and economic structures and destitution. For this reason, the paper proposes that the incarnation should be the theological expression and solution to the experience of the African context—a situation in which the ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor is alarming. The theological imperative and justification for active involvement with their society is simple—everything was made by and for Christ, everything holds together in Christ, and everything will be reconciled by Christ (Col 1:15–20). But how did John arrive at the concept of *Logos*? How did he view the incarnation and so make sense of God’s love for humans? Against this background, the paper investigated the evolution and development of John’s *Logos* and concludes that the incarnation is the hermeneutical foundation and motif for African public life.

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