

1-1-2004

## Biblical Spirituality as Incarnation of the Word

M. Robert Mulholland

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mulholland, M. Robert (2004) "Biblical Spirituality as Incarnation of the Word," *Leaven*: Vol. 12: Iss. 4, Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol12/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu](mailto:bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu).

# Biblical Spirituality as Incarnation of the Word

M. ROBERT MULHOLLAND

---

When you hear or read the phrase “biblical spirituality” what comes to mind? Is “biblical spirituality” for you simply another way to speak of Christian spirituality, thus distinguishing it from non-Christian spiritualities? Or does “biblical spirituality” denote a special subset of Christian spiritualities, a spirituality that has the Bible as its source rather than a particular theology or liturgy or tradition? Perhaps you think of the spirituality contained in the Bible. But then the question is which one? Is it the spirituality of Paul, John, Jesus, a prophet, Moses, or David? Which one is it?

As you can see, the phrase “biblical spirituality” can mean different things for different people, and we probably haven’t begun to delineate all the possible variant connotations. Perhaps there is a way of conceiving “biblical spirituality” that cuts through the particularized connotations and informs them all.

Such a conception may begin with the focal biblical reality, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). The Old Testament is replete with accounts of God being present with humanity in various ways<sup>1</sup> together with the promises of God’s presence in the future in a new and special way.<sup>2</sup> The New Testament writers understood those promises fulfilled in Jesus, the Word become flesh. While we wrestle with the mystery of God becoming human, how Jesus could be both fully human and fully divine, Christian tradition has recognized from the beginning that God was in Jesus.

There is, however, another mystery in the Christian experience, a companion to the Word become flesh: the mystery of the Word becoming “text.” The Word becomes text in order to provide a place of transforming encounter with God so that the Word might become flesh in us in our world. The perennial discussions as to the nature of scripture, the character of its inspiration, its authority, its canonical status, are but partial and incomplete attempts to wrestle with this profound mystery in the same way that the Christological discussions of Christian history have wrestled in partial and incomplete ways with the mystery of the Word become flesh.

In both discussions, there is the tendency to overemphasize one aspect of the divine/human union to the detriment of the other. In Christological debates, overemphasis upon the divine nature of Christ is countered by overemphasis upon his human nature. In the debates over the nature of Scripture, the overemphasis upon the human nature of the documents is countered with an overemphasis upon their divine nature. In both cases, the failures relate not so much to the inadequacy of human reason, although that certainly contributes, but to the fact that we are engaged with realities that elude containment within the narrow and inadequate



parameters of human reason. The Word become flesh is, ultimately, an unfathomable mystery. The Word become text is an equally dense enigma.

Now if these two enigmatic realities are not enough to blow our minds, together they point to yet another and even more opaque mystery: the Word is to become flesh in us! One pointer to this unbelievable idea is found in Paul. In his description of Christ in the "Christ Hymn" of Col 1:15-20, Paul writes, "In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (1:19). Of course, this is not an unusual affirmation for a faith that believes that God became incarnate in Jesus. But have you ever conjoined to this verse Paul's prayer in Eph 3:19, "... that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"?<sup>3</sup> It would seem that Paul believes that we are to become just like Jesus! This is, of course, consistent with Paul's understanding of what the faith is all about. It is a journey of growing "up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ" (Eph 4:15), until we all attain "the unity of the faith," which is "the knowledge of the Son of God" or "maturity" that Paul defines as "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

Paul goes even further when he identifies Christ as our life. "You have died, and your life has been hidden with Christ in God. Whenever Christ, who is your life, should become manifest, then you also will be manifest with him in glory" (Col 3:3-4). Here we come to mystery. First, this "life," whatever it is, is not something we generate. It is something that God has already "hidden" with Christ in God. Second, the root of this life is not grounded in us; it is grounded with Christ in God.

Paul seems to be saying that in the cross of Jesus, God has done two things: (1) God has entered into the entirety of our self-referenced structure of being and confirmed it as dead; and (2) in the core of that

**The Word become flesh is, ultimately, an unfathomable mystery. The Word become text is an equally dense enigma.**

deadness God has planted Christ as the seed of a true life in loving union with God. Paul states this in another way in Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (2:19-20). When we awaken to this indwelling reality at the core of our being and turn from the deadness of our self-referenced being to be

embraced by the indwelling love of Christ, we enter into the "life that has been hidden with Christ in God," that deep inner reorientation out of which we allow Christ to live in us.

Then Paul adds, "Whenever Christ, who is your life, should become manifest, then you also will be manifest with him in glory." Interestingly, Paul has two subjects in this part of the sentence: "Christ," and "your life."<sup>4</sup> This is another way of saying "your life has been hidden with Christ in God." In this mystical union with Christ in love, Christ becomes our true life or, as we have seen Paul say, "It is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

"Whenever this life should become manifest," Paul says, "you also will be manifest with him in glory." Paul is not simply speaking eschatologically here. Further, Paul is not talking about some distant event; he is talking about an essential dimension of daily life. Paul is saying whenever we allow Christ truly to indwell us, allow the Holy Spirit to transformingly empower us, allow the fullness of God to be the context and content of our life in the world, then who we truly are becomes manifest in its Christlikeness. We will "appear with him in glory"—that is, in the very "nature" of who Christ is.<sup>5</sup>

When Paul says, "whenever," he is pointing to any relationship, any situation or circumstance in our daily life. When, in that moment, we live in loving union with God, our life becomes a place where others experience the presence of God's love, mercy, and grace touching their lives with cleansing, healing, liberation, transformation. They experience the Word becoming flesh in us.

Reflecting upon the nature of self and identity in the light of what Paul says here about the life hid with Christ in God and manifested in Christ's likeness, it would seem our true self/identity is something completely out of our control. Our part is to be completely abandoned to God in love and fully available to God

for others. In the “nothingness”<sup>6</sup> of a self utterly devoid of self-referenced dynamics, totally devoted to God for others, in the exigency of the “nothingness” that stands between God and the other, God forms us as a self who manifests something of God’s presence to the “other.”

At the same time, God is mysteriously present in the “other” for us and shapes our self/identity in that relationship. We tend to perceive self/identity as a “possession” for which we are responsible, an entity separate from God and the “other” which has to take on multiple levels of “Christian” coloration and then act it out in relationships and situations. This is the basic perspective of the self-referenced life.

The deeper dimensions of Paul’s statement that our life is hidden with Christ in God, as well as his later claim that Christ is all and in all (Col 3:11), introduces us to the mystery of a Christ-referenced life: a self that God, through the Holy Spirit, engenders in the context of the relationships and situations of our daily life. Thus, every situation, every relationship, provides ever-new settings and opportunities for God to actualize our true self/identity—for the Word to become flesh in us. While there will, of course, be an ever-deepening Christlikeness in the nature of that self/identity, it will never be an entity to which we attach ourselves. The moment we attach to any point of this development, we become again self-referenced and our self/identity becomes a commodity we possess and employ.

Paul is not the only New Testament writer who suggests we are to be the Word become flesh, to live Christlike lives. Peter frames this reality thus:

God has given us ... precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may *become partakers of the divine nature* (2 Peter 1:4, emphasis mine).

Clearly Peter, like Paul, understands that the purpose of the Christian life is to become like Christ. To “become partakers of the divine nature” can be understood as the Word becoming flesh in us. In a profound sense, this is the goal of biblical spirituality, the restoration of the human creation to the image of God in which it was created.

John, also, understands the Christian life in these terms: “... as he is, so are we in this world” (1 John 4:17), and “whoever says, ‘I abide in him,’ ought to walk just as he walked” (1 John 2:6). You can’t find much clearer statements of the radical idea that the Word is to become flesh in us, especially from the one who gives us the phrase (John 1:14).

Where do these men get this outlandish idea that we are to be just like Jesus? I suspect that its origins lie with Jesus himself. One section of Jesus’ prayer in John 17 is a radical statement of biblical spirituality:

I ask not only on behalf of these (the eleven disciples), but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word (that is we), that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:20-23 NRSV, parentheses mine).

When Jesus prays that we may all be one, he is not praying for some theological, ecclesiological or sociological unity. He is not asking for a homogeneity that levels all diversity and brings plurality into a single “authorized” manifestation of the Christian life or community. The unity, the oneness Jesus prays for is illustrated by his own relationship with God: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.” Jesus is praying that his followers would live in exactly the same kind of relationship with God that he has. Jesus is indicating that the goal of the Christian life is a life of loving union with God at the depths of our being, the Word becoming flesh in us!

Something of the profound nature of Jesus' prayer comes to light when he says, "The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one." The word "glory" is the translation of a Greek word that represents the essential characteristics or nature of persons or things that make them who they are. Thus, the "glory" of God is God's very nature, the essence of who God is.

There are a number of places in the New Testament where this realization of the meaning of "glory" opens a verse up to much deeper dimensions. For instance, Peter writes, "the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you (1 Pet 4:14 NRSV). In the parallelism of the text, glory = God. Peter also says that we have been called to God's glory, that is, to be partakers of God's own nature (1 Pet 5:10, 2 Pet 1:3). Paul indicates that as a result of our sin, we have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23), but now that we have been restored in our relationship with God through Christ, we hope to share the glory of God (Rom 5:2).

Then there is Paul's assertion, "We all, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness, from glory into glory" (2 Cor 3:18). Here again, the parallelism of the passage reveals that glory = likeness. When Paul says we are being changed from glory into glory, he means that we are being changed from what we are in our unlikeness to Christ into his likeness. When Jesus, therefore, says that he has given to us the glory that God has given to him, he is indicating that he has made it possible for us to once again be formed in the image of God, to share God's nature as we were intended. Jesus is saying that he has imparted to us God's nature, which dwells in him. He has made possible the restoration of union with God. He has made it possible for the Word to become flesh in us.

Jesus also indicates there is yet a larger purpose for our union with God: "That the world may believe ... and know that you have sent me." Our union with God is not some private "possession" for our individual benefit. Union with God is for the purpose of being those in whom God's presence touches the world with forgiveness, cleansing, healing, liberation, and transforming grace. John, as we have seen, saw this clearly: "As He is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17 NRSV). The world will not believe in Christ because of our sound theology, our correct creed, our well-defined dogma, our rigorous religiosity. It will believe when it sees Christlikeness manifested in our life, when it sees the Word become flesh in us. The world will not know that God has sent Christ simply because we pronounce it to be so but when they see Christlikeness lived out in their midst in our lives in the world.

Such Christlikeness, however, is the consequence of a loving union with God. This is why Jesus finishes his prayer for us with the words, "that the world may know that you ... have loved them even as you have loved me." The origin of a loving union with God lies in God's unfathomable love for us. Think of it, Jesus says that God loves us in exactly the same way that God loves him! To respond to such love with the love of our total being draws us into that loving union with God for which Jesus prays.

It is to this life of deep, loving union with God that the mothers and fathers of our spiritual tradition call us. Archbishop Demetrios, writing of St. Ignatius of Antioch, one of the earliest church fathers (early 2nd century), says, "The absolute priority of God, the vital need for a real, existential connection with Him, the urgency of focusing on Him and entering into an advanced, total relationship with Him, seems to be the Ignatian message reaching our present."<sup>7</sup>

St. Athanasius of Alexandria (300's) wrote, "He became man that we might be made god."<sup>8</sup> St. Simeon the *New Theologian* (949-1022) describes in third person his experience of union with God:

A divine radiance suddenly appeared in abundance from above and filled the whole room. When this happened, the young man lost all awareness of his surroundings and forgot whether he was in a house or under a roof. He saw nothing but light on every side, and did not even know if he was standing on the ground ... He was wholly united to non-material light and, so it seemed, he had himself been turned into light."<sup>9</sup>

Kallistos Ware, writing of the prayer of the heart in the eastern tradition, says, “ ‘Prayer of the heart,’ therefore, means not just ‘affective prayer’ but prayer of the entire person ... a state of reintegration, in which the one who prays is totally united with the prayer itself and with the Divine Companion to whom the prayer is addressed.”<sup>10</sup> Gregory Palamas (d. 1359) writes: “Participating in that light which surpasses them they are themselves transformed into it ... the light alone shines through them and it alone is what they see ... and in this way God is all in all.”<sup>11</sup>

Ware summarizes Palamas’s understanding, “Christianity is not merely a philosophical theory or a moral code, but involves a direct sharing in divine life and glory, a transforming union with God ‘face to face.’”<sup>12</sup> Bonaventura (d. 1274), writing of St. Francis of Assisi, said, “He seemed to be completely absorbed by the fire of divine love like a glowing coal ... and he longed to be wholly transformed into him (Christ) by the fire of his love.”<sup>13</sup> Meister Eckhart (c.1260-1328) likewise was concerned with the union between the soul and God. In his *Spiritual Canticle*, St. John of the Cross (1542-1591) focuses upon the soul’s “espousal” or union with God: “Love never reaches perfection until the lovers are so alike that one is transfigured in the other.”<sup>14</sup> He then amplifies on this idea:

This spiritual marriage is incomparably greater than the spiritual espousal, for it is a total transformation in the beloved in which each surrenders the entire possession of the self to the other with a certain consummation of the union of love. The soul thereby becomes divine, becomes God through participation, insofar as is possible in this life. ... It is accordingly the highest state attainable in this life.”<sup>15</sup>

Also speaking of this spiritual marriage, the union of the soul with God, Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) writes: “One can say no more—insofar as can be understood—than that the soul, I mean the spirit, is made one with God.”<sup>16</sup> Again, Julian of Norwich (1342-1416+) writes, “Our soul is united to him who is unchangeable goodness. ... For our soul is so wholly united to God, through his own goodness, that between God and our soul nothing can interpose.”<sup>17</sup> Finally, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) puts it this way, “This Spirit of God, dwelling in us, given to us, to be as it were our own Spirit, enables us to know and experience, in a mysterious manner, the reality and presence of the divine mercy in ourselves. So the Holy Spirit is intimately united to our own inmost self, and His presence in us makes our ‘I’ the ‘I’ of God.”<sup>18</sup> This is but a small sample of the theme of union with God in love, the Word becoming flesh in us, that runs strong and deep through two millennia of Christian life and experience.

Such a reality is not, as so many think, a “fringe” phenomena—the pursuit of special persons in special circumstances. This is the crucial, irreducible center of biblical spirituality. The heart of biblical spirituality is the profound mystery of the Word becoming flesh, not in Jesus alone, but in us. All other dimensions of biblical spirituality are adjuncts to this radical reality.

ROBERT MULHOLLAND, JR.

Dr. Mulholland is professor of New Testament at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky, and has served as faculty member with the Academy for Spiritual Formation of the Upper Room since 1983.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Gen 26:24, 28:25; Isa 41:10, 43:5; Jer 1:8, 19; Hag 1:13 for a few of the explicit statements where God affirms God’s presence with a person or Israel, together with numerous accounts of God’s presence with the people.
- 2 Cf. Jer 24:5-7, 31:31-34; Ezek 36:26-28; Hos 2:14-20 and all the prophetic promises of God’s dwelling with the covenant people when they are restored and the people having an intimate relationship with God.
- 3 The Greek in both texts is the same: *pan to plērōma*.
- 4 In the Greek both Christ (*ho christos*) and your life (*hē zōē hymōn*) are in the nominative case, indicating they are the subject of the sentence.

- 5 Cf. the discussion of “glory” in this article.
- 6 Merton writes: “At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship (sic). It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.” Quote from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (Garden City, NJ: Image Books, 1968), 158. The “*absolute poverty*” (italics his) of which Merton writes is the radical abandonment of one’s self to God wherein the “nothingness” becomes the place of our true being from which “God disposes of our lives” for the sake of the world. Here is where the Word becomes flesh in us.
- 7 Archbishop Demetrios, “Voices From the Past Addressing Our Present,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, (Spring 2002): 13.
- 8 *De Incarnatione*, 54.
- 9 Catechesis XXII, Lines 88-100.
- 10 Kallistos Ware, “The Eastern Tradition from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century,” in *The Study of Spirituality*, eds. Jones, Wainwright, Yarnold, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 246.
- 11 Triads, II, iii. 31, N. Grendle, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
- 12 Ware, 254.
- 13 Leg. Mai. 9:1-2. E. Cousins, “The Life of St. Francis,” *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979).
- 14 *John of the Cross: Selected Writings*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 235.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 257.
- 16 *The Interior Castle 2:3, Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 178.
- 17 *Showings*, Ch. 46, *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, trans. Colledge and Walsh, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 259.
- 18 Thomas Merton, “The Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III),” in *Cistercian Studies Quarterly Review*, 1983, 210.

