

Research Article

Contemporary Theological Relevance of the Incarnation: Addressing Human Suffering in the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

Nigeria is confronted with profound challenges related to human suffering, primarily driven by poverty, insecurity, corruption, and systemic inequality. These pressing issues raise significant theological and practical questions, especially concerning the capacity of Christian doctrines, such as the Incarnation, to engage with these harsh realities. This research investigates the contemporary theological significance of the Incarnation—the belief in God becoming human through Jesus Christ—as a means to comprehend and respond to human suffering within the Nigerian context. The main aim is to analyze how the Incarnation can foster hope, solidarity, and transformative initiatives to tackle Nigeria's socio-economic and political difficulties. Employing a theological and contextual approach, the study incorporates scriptural interpretation, doctrinal analysis, and socio-political examination. It also draws on insights from related disciplines, including sociology and political science, to provide a well-rounded perspective on the issues at hand. The findings indicate that the Incarnation demonstrate God's solidarity with human suffering, encourages compassionate involvement, and strengthens advocacy for justice. Additionally, it illustrates how the Nigerian church can embody the tenets of the Incarnation by engaging in holistic ministry, promoting reconciliation, and addressing systemic challenges through social advocacy. This research enhances understanding by presenting the Incarnation as a dual source of hope and a practical model for engagement, offering both theological and actionable insights aimed at alleviating suffering and fostering transformation in Nigeria

Keywords

Incarnation, Human Suffering, Solidarity, Relevance

1. Introduction

The doctrine of incarnation presents a multifaceted challenge for comprehension and belief, a challenge that has persisted across various historical periods. The concept of Jesus' incarnation raises profound questions regarding the nature of divinity and humanity; it is indeed perplexing to consider how a human can give birth to God or how a virgin can conceive the Son of God. Despite these difficulties, the incarnation emphasizes the significance of human beings in the eyes of God.

Charlene P. E. Burns [1] notes that “the problem of how to understand the figure of Jesus had plagued Christianity from the onset.” Understanding and believing in the incarnation as revealed in scripture necessitates faith. Thomas F. Torrance [2] stresses that Christian faith begins with the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Graham A. Cole [3] highlights that “With the incarnation comes a newness in God’s dealings with humankind that the early Church Fathers appre-

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ciated.” Scripture indicates that God created humans for love, service, and fellowship with Him, yet humanity has fallen short of this divine purpose (Rom 3:23). Consequently, God chose to intervene through Christ to restore humanity to Himself, demonstrating His profound love (Jn 3:16). Jesus, having lived as a complete human being, serves as the ultimate model for how humans should interact with one another and with God, illustrating that the incarnation is fundamentally a “relational concept.” [1] The doctrine of the Incarnation is pivotal within Christian theology, asserting that God took on human form in Jesus Christ to redeem humanity and express divine empathy towards human suffering. This theological and existential importance is especially pertinent in contexts characterized by significant hardship, such as Nigeria. Given its intricate sociopolitical landscape—marked by pervasive poverty, ethno-religious strife, systemic corruption, and environmental challenges—Nigeria necessitates theological reflections that resonate with the lived experiences of its populace.

In the midst of Nigeria's dynamic religious environment, the reality of human suffering remains a significant concern. While numerous churches provide spiritual support, there exists a pressing need for a deeper theological engagement with social challenges, rooted in the message of divine solidarity inherent in the Incarnation. This research investigates how the doctrine of the Incarnation can motivate the Church in Nigeria to effectively address human suffering within its specific context. It delves into the theological implications of the Incarnation as a framework for confronting human suffering, examining its socio-economic and political dimensions, and suggesting actionable strategies for the Church to integrate incarnational theology into its mission and ministry. The study employs a theological and contextual approach, incorporating scriptural analysis, doctrinal examination, and socio-political scrutiny, while also drawing on insights from sociology and political science to provide a well-rounded understanding of the issues at hand.

This article assesses the contemporary relevance of the Incarnation in tackling human suffering in Nigeria. It argues that the Incarnation, as a theological construct, offers deep insights into God's connection with human anguish and serves as a call for the Church to embody Christ's mission of compassion, justice, and hope in meaningful and transformative ways. By engaging with biblical, historical, and contextual viewpoints, the study aims to bridge the divide between theological contemplation and the realities of everyday life. By centering on the Incarnation as a lens for addressing human suffering, this article not only contributes to theological discourse but also provides practical recommendations for the Nigerian Church's engagement in societal issues.

2. Biblical, Historical-Theological Foundations of Incarnation

To grasp the contemporary relevance of the Incarnation, it

is essential to first explore its biblical foundations and the historical-theological evolution that has shaped its understanding. The Gospel of John serves as a pivotal text for the doctrine of the Incarnation, stating, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14, NIV). This development throughout history illustrates the Church's endeavor to express the profound mystery of God becoming human in a manner that remains true to Scripture, tradition, and human comprehension.

2.1. The Biblical Foundation of the Incarnation

The Scriptures provide a framework for the doctrine of the Incarnation, which requires faith for its full comprehension (Rom 1:17). In his work *Proslogion*, St. Anselm of Canterbury [4] articulates the pursuit of faith in the quest for authentic understanding. The biblical interpretation of the Incarnation challenges human philosophical reasoning from the outset. The question arises: how can God assume human form? The Incarnation represents one of the most profound mysteries within Christian belief, encapsulated in the assertion that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). This foundational passage underscores the transformative reality of God embracing human nature through Jesus Christ. Additional New Testament texts, such as Philippians 2:5–11, highlight Christ's humility in taking on human existence, culminating in his death on the cross. Hebrews 2:14–18 further emphasizes the Incarnation as God's means of fully engaging with human vulnerability and suffering, stating, “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.”

John asserts that those who acknowledge that Jesus Christ came in a genuine body belong to God, while those who deny this truth do not (1 Jn 4:2–3). The doctrine of the Incarnation is articulated in John 1:1–14, 18, affirming that the Word existed from the beginning, was with God, and was God, ultimately becoming human and living among humanity. Matthew illustrates this process, revealing how Mary, a virgin, conceived a Son through the power of the Spirit and gave birth to Him, named Immanuel (Matt 1:18–25). In Philippians 2:6–7, Paul asserts that Jesus, though divine, relinquished His divine privileges and was born as a human. Through His existence, Jesus reveals the nature of God to humanity. The scriptures provide additional justifications for the doctrine of the Incarnation, including the revelation of God to humankind (Jn 1:18; 14:7–11), the provision of a high priest who intercedes for us and empathizes with our weaknesses (Heb 4:14–16), the establishment of a model for a fulfilled human life (1 Pet 2:21; Jn 2:6), the offering of a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of all people (He 10:1–10), the destruction of the works of the devil (1 Jn 3:8), and the redemption of those under the law (Gal 4:4 [3]).

Theologically, these passages illustrate the Incarnation as an expression of divine love and solidarity, wherein God engages with the human experience not merely as an observ-

er but as an active participant. This involvement encompasses not only physical presence but also the realities of suffering, rejection, and death. For Nigerian Christians, these scriptural foundations reinforce the belief that God comprehends their challenges and accompanies them in their suffering.

2.2. A Concise Historical-Theological Development of the Doctrine of the Incarnation

The doctrine of the Incarnation, which is pivotal to Christian theology, has experienced considerable evolution since the early Church. This doctrine posits that in Jesus Christ, God became entirely human while simultaneously remaining fully divine, a belief that is fundamental to the Christian faith. In the early stages of the development of the Incarnation doctrine, Grenz J. Stanley [5] notes that the primary debate that preoccupied the Church during its initial centuries revolved around the question of Jesus' relationship to God. He further observes that the "apostolic era experience changes as the gospel spread beyond the Palestine world into the wider Roman world, a tension arose between the Jewish and Greek philosophy. The Jewish are characterized by their Monotheism and moralism background, while the Greek are characterized with their rationalistic approach, metaphysics, being, and substance" [5].

The early Church Fathers engaged in profound theological discourse regarding the Incarnation, asserting that in Jesus Christ, the divine Word took on human form. Prominent theologians such as Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa contended that the Incarnation was vital for human salvation, encapsulated in Athanasius' [6] well-known assertion that "Christ became human so that humanity might partake in divine life: He became what we are, so that He might make us what He is." The early Church emphasized the genuine, historical, and bodily nature of the Incarnation to affirm God's complete involvement in the human experience. Gregory of Nyssa [7] articulated the Incarnation as the juncture where the eternal intersects with the temporal, with the divine embracing human existence. He noted that "The transcendent God enters time not in a distant fashion but by becoming fully involved in the rhythm of human life," which directly opposed the heresy of Docetism that posited Christ's physical form as an illusion. For Gregory and his contemporaries, the tangible nature of the Incarnation underscored the sanctity of the material world.

During the Middle Ages, the Incarnation underwent a more systematic examination, particularly through the lens of Scholasticism, which aimed to reconcile theology with rational thought. Theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas delved deeper into the complexities of the Incarnation. Anselm [8], in his work *Cur Deus Homo*, argued for the necessity of the Incarnation for humanity's redemption, asserting that only a God-man could adequately

address human sin. Meanwhile, Thomas Aquinas [9], drawing from Aristotelian philosophy, highlighted the Incarnation as a profound expression of God's wisdom and love, striving to unify reason and faith in his seminal work, *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas placed significant emphasis on the theological relevance of the material world and the human body in the context of the Incarnation.

The Protestant Reformation introduced new perspectives on the Incarnation, highlighting its importance for grace, faith, and salvation. Reformed theologians such as Martin Luther and John Calvin placed significant emphasis on the humanity of Christ. Luther's [10] theology of the cross particularly emphasized God's willingness to engage with human suffering, asserting that the Incarnation reveals God's glory as concealed within suffering and weakness, which stands in stark contrast to the secular emphasis on power and success. Alister McGrath [11] observes that Luther viewed the Incarnation as a profound expression of God's solidarity with sinful humanity, thereby stressing its pastoral relevance. Similarly, John Calvin [12] highlighted the dual nature of Christ, considering the Incarnation crucial for comprehending God's relationship with humanity, stating that "Christ is the mirror of divine power, wisdom, and righteousness, for in him we see God visibly present."

Modern theologians have reexamined the Incarnation through the lenses of existential, cultural, and social issues, rendering it a vibrant doctrine within contemporary theology. Karl Barth's [13] Christocentric approach positioned the Incarnation as central to divine revelation, asserting that it represents the ultimate act of God's self-disclosure and the pathway through which humanity can know God. He articulates that "In Jesus Christ, we have the full and final revelation of who God is and what God wills for us." In contrast, Karl Rahner [14] emphasized the connection between the Incarnation and human experience, arguing that it should be viewed as part of God's continuous self-communication to humanity, encompassing not only Christ's historical existence but also God's enduring presence in the world through grace. Rahner's notion of the "supernatural existential" posits that all individuals are receptive to divine grace as a result of the Incarnation [14].

Drawing upon his theological aesthetics, Hans Urs von Balthasar [15] perceived the Incarnation as a significant event wherein God unveils divine beauty and glory. For Balthasar, the Incarnation transcends a mere historical occurrence; it represents a cosmic event that beckons humanity to engage in the divine narrative of salvation. His focus on the aesthetic and dramatic aspects of the Incarnation offers a lens through which one can comprehend the manifestation of divine presence in a world that frequently seeks significance through art, beauty, and narrative. Jürgen Moltmann [16] further linked the Incarnation to God's empathy with human suffering, particularly as exemplified in Christ's crucifixion. These insights broaden the understanding of the Incarnation's implications for justice, hope, and social change within a

secular context.

The historical evolution of the doctrine of the Incarnation stresses its lasting depth and relevance. From the early Church's endeavors to define Christ's dual nature to contemporary reflections on its existential and societal ramifications, the Incarnation remains a profound enigma that connects the divine with the human experience. It continues to motivate theological exploration and practical involvement in matters concerning human dignity, suffering, and the quest for hope.

2.3. Contemporary Perspectives on the Doctrine of Incarnation

The doctrine of the Incarnation continues to be a significant area of exploration within modern theology, particularly as scholars confront contemporary philosophical inquiries, cultural dynamics, and global issues. While it is firmly anchored in the traditional Christian conviction that God became fully human in the person of Jesus Christ, recent interpretations broaden its relevance to themes of human dignity, suffering, solidarity, and hope. Rahner [13] has articulated the Incarnation as the ultimate expression of God's self-communication, positing that Jesus Christ serves as a manifestation of divine grace and presence throughout human history, thereby addressing humanity's quest for meaning. Jürgen Moltmann [16], in his work *The Crucified God*, delves into the Incarnation as a demonstration of God's solidarity with human suffering, particularly through the lens of Christ's crucifixion, which provides hope amid oppression and global crises.

Feminist theologians, such as Elizabeth A. Johnson [17], interpret the Incarnation as a validation of the sacredness inherent in all embodied existence, particularly for those who are marginalized, while liberation theologians like Leonardo Boff and Gustavo Gutiérrez [18] perceive it as God's alignment with the impoverished and a summons for justice. Boff [19] contends that the Incarnation compels Christians to engage in solidarity with those who suffer, asserting that "To encounter Christ is to encounter the suffering of the poor and the cry for liberation." Additionally, ecological theologians, including Sallie McFague [20], broaden the scope of the Incarnation to encompass creation itself, portraying Christ as the reconciler of humanity and the natural world. These evolving interpretations position the Incarnation as a vibrant theological construct that addresses the pressing human and environmental challenges of our time.

Current African interpretations of the doctrine of the Incarnation emphasize its relevance within African contexts, tackling themes such as suffering, communal values, and cultural identity. The Incarnation is perceived as God's demonstration of solidarity with humanity, particularly towards those who are suffering and marginalized. As noted by Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator [21], the Incarnation serves to affirm God's connection with human struggles, providing hope and empowerment amidst poverty and injustice. Afri-

can theologians like John Mbiti [22] contend that the Incarnation validates the dignity of African cultures and religious practices, presenting Christ as one who engages with and transforms diverse human experiences. A distinctive feature of African Christology is the portrayal of Jesus as an "Ancestor" or "Elder Brother," concepts that are deeply embedded in African kinship traditions. This perspective, supported by Bénézet Bujo [23], depicts Christ as a life-giving mediator who reconciles the divide between God and humanity, offering a culturally relevant understanding of salvation. Furthermore, the African philosophy of Ubuntu, which emphasizes communal interconnectedness, is applied to the Incarnation to illustrate Jesus' role in mending fractured relationships and promoting justice and reconciliation. In the context of Nigerian theology, these insights urge the Church to transcend spiritual abstraction and engage with the tangible realities of suffering present in society.

2.4. The Incarnation and Solidarity with the Suffering

2.4.1. Jesus Christ as the Model for Solidarity

The Incarnation illustrates a God who chooses to intimately connect with humanity, presenting Himself not as an aloof deity but as Emmanuel, meaning "God with us" (Matt 1:23). This connection is particularly evident in the ministry of Jesus, who engaged with the marginalized, provided healing to the sick, and challenged oppressive systems. In Luke 4:18–19, Jesus articulates his purpose to deliver good news to the impoverished, grant freedom to the captives, and restore sight to the blind. This mission highlights the Incarnation as a profound expression of divine solidarity with human suffering. By fully embracing humanity, God in Christ partakes in the entirety of human existence, including its suffering. Dietrich Bonhoeffer [24] emphasizes that "Only a suffering God can help," indicating that God's involvement in human pain offers solace to those who endure hardship.

Timothy Keller [25] further asserts that "in Jesus, God came into the world and personally experienced the full range of human suffering," signifying that God is not detached from human anguish but is deeply engaged in it, offering comfort and hope. Richard Rohr [26] adds that "The Incarnation tells us that God is not far off and removed from our world but is intimately present to us, in us, and in all things." The Incarnation affirms that God is not a distant, unapproachable entity but rather one who assumes human form and dwells among us. J. I. Packer [27] concludes that "God became man so that we might know God and have a relationship with him. The incarnation tells us that God is not far off, but rather he has come near to us in the person of Jesus Christ".

The Gospels uniformly illustrate Jesus' interactions with marginalized individuals within society. He shared meals with tax collectors, advocated for the oppressed, and provid-

ed healing to those ostracized by their communities. These actions transcended mere acts of kindness; they represented the imminent Kingdom of God, characterized by justice, mercy, and love. For the Nigerian Church, this example necessitates a dedication to supporting those in suffering, addressing their urgent needs while simultaneously striving to reform the systems that sustain injustice.

2.4.2. The Cross as the Pinnacle of Solidarity with Human Pain

The Cross stands as the most profound demonstration of God's solidarity with human suffering. Through the crucifixion of Jesus, God immerses Himself in the depths of human anguish, shouldering the burdens of sin, injustice, and mortality. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann [16] emphasizes in *The Crucified God* that the Cross serves not only as a manifestation of divine love but also as a profound connection with the world's suffering. For Nigerians facing poverty, violence, and systemic injustice, the Cross symbolizes hope, affirming that God is not detached from their struggles but is actively engaged in them. Furthermore, the Resurrection redefines the experience of suffering, presenting a promise of renewal and triumph over despair.

2.4.3. Theological Reflections on God's Identification with the Oppressed

From a theological perspective, the Incarnation underscores the inherent dignity of human life, illustrating that God cherishes humanity sufficiently to become part of it. It also serves as a paradigm for Christian discipleship, urging believers to reflect Christ's humility, compassion, and selfless love. In the context of Nigeria, a nation confronting poverty, violence, and corruption, the Incarnation provides a basis for rethinking the Church's mission as one focused on healing, reconciliation, and transformative action.

Liberation theology offers a lens through which to comprehend the Incarnation as God's preferential choice for the marginalized and oppressed. Gustavo Gutiérrez [18] emphasizes that genuine knowledge of God necessitates a commitment to justice, positing that authentic theology must confront the lived experiences of those in distress. Likewise, African theologians such as Allan Boesak [28] have underscored the significance of liberation theology in addressing the challenges faced by postcolonial societies. Within the Nigerian context, this viewpoint compels the Church to stand in solidarity with the oppressed, advocating for justice and systemic reform. The situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from Boko Haram's insurgencies illustrates the need for not only material assistance but also active participation in peace-building and reconciliation initiatives. The Incarnation calls upon Nigerian Christians to manifest Christ's presence within their communities, particularly among those who suffer, which can be realized through charity, social advocacy, fostering unity, and providing pastoral care.

2.5. Human Suffering in the Nigerian Context

Human suffering has long been a focal point of philosophical and theological exploration. From a philosophical standpoint, suffering is often associated with the problem of evil, which interrogates the compatibility of a benevolent God with the existence of suffering in the world. Augustine of Hippo [29] grappled with this dilemma, contending that evil arises from humanity's misuse of free will rather than from divine intention. Theologically, suffering is viewed through the prism of redemption; in Christian doctrine, it is not solely punitive but can also be redemptive, as exemplified by the passion and crucifixion of Christ. Karl Rahner [14] posits that suffering, when united with Christ, becomes a means of participating in God's salvific mission. In Nigeria, human suffering manifests as a complex and pervasive issue, intricately linked to socio-economic challenges, political instability, ethnic conflicts, and environmental degradation. The interplay of these factors has created a multi-dimensional crisis that impacts millions of Nigerians daily. In the Nigerian context, where suffering manifests in multifaceted ways, these perspectives of the incarnation provide a basis for understanding and addressing its spiritual and social dimensions.

3. Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is fundamentally theological and contextual, drawing upon scriptural texts, doctrinal evaluations, and socio-political assessments. It also incorporates perspectives from related disciplines, including sociology and political science, to investigate the modern significance of the Incarnation in relation to human suffering in Nigeria. The methodology encompasses several key components.

3.1. Theological Analysis

This aspect of the research delves into the doctrine of the Incarnation through the examination of biblical texts, as well as historical and systematic theological literature. It involves a critical examination of pivotal scriptures such as John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5-11 to elucidate the theological underpinnings of the Incarnation and its relevance to human suffering. Additionally, the study reviews both historical and contemporary interpretations of the Incarnation, with a particular focus on African and global theological viewpoints, to underscore its importance in addressing the issue of suffering.

3.2. Contextual Analysis

The research adopts a contextual theology framework, which merges theological principles with the lived experiences of the Nigerian populace. This entails a thorough examination of Nigeria's socio-economic, political, and reli-

gious contexts to uncover the underlying causes and expressions of human suffering. The study draws on existing reports and academic literature to illuminate specific examples of suffering, including poverty, violence, and inequality.

3.3. Interdisciplinary Engagement and Practical Theology Approach

This research integrates insights from various fields such as sociology, economics, and political science to offer a holistic understanding of the challenges faced in Nigeria. This interdisciplinary strategy aids in situating theological reflections within the realities of everyday life and suggests practical solutions that are grounded in both theological and pragmatic frameworks. The study places a strong emphasis on praxis, highlighting how the principles of the Incarnation can guide effective responses to suffering and proposing methods for the church to actively engage with systemic issues like corruption, poverty, and violence.

3.4. The Nigerian Reality of Suffering

Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa, presents a stark juxtaposition of wealth and widespread human distress. This section delves into the critical aspects of suffering within the Nigerian landscape.

3.4.1. Poverty and Economic Inequality

Poverty stands as a primary contributor to suffering in Nigeria, with a substantial portion of the population existing below the poverty threshold. Despite its wealth in oil and other natural resources, Nigeria ranks among the countries with the highest poverty rates in the world. The World Bank (WB) [30] estimates that as of 2023, approximately 38.9% of Nigerians live in poverty, translating to around 87 million individuals, making it the second-largest population of impoverished people globally, following India. This pervasive poverty is intensified by factors such as unemployment, inflation, and inadequate access to education and healthcare. Corruption, ineffective governance, and systemic disparities further exacerbate economic inequality, leaving families struggling to meet basic needs, which in turn leads to hunger, malnutrition, and limited educational and healthcare opportunities. Consequently, the rise in poverty has rendered Nigeria impoverished not only materially but also morally, as noted by Pandang Yamsat [31], who asserts that despite the religious devotion of many Nigerians, there exists a spiritual and moral impoverishment.

3.4.2. Ethno-religious Conflicts and Insecurity

The rich tapestry of Nigeria's ethnic and religious diversity has frequently been a catalyst for conflict and violence. The Biafran War from 1967 to 1970 serves as a historical illustration of ethnic discord, while ongoing confrontations, such as those between Christian agriculturalists and Muslim pastoral-

ists, continue to result in loss of life. Chinua Achebe [32] highlights that the inability to confront the nation's entrenched ethnic divisions has fostered enduring cycles of distrust and violence, thereby undermining national cohesion. The Boko Haram insurgency in the northeast, clashes between herders and farmers in the middle belt, and various forms of communal violence have led to significant casualties and widespread displacement across the country.

Amnesty International [33] emphasizes the human rights violations perpetrated by both insurgent groups and government forces, which have intensified the suffering of impacted communities. This environment of insecurity not only amplifies trauma but also exacerbates social divisions, posing a significant challenge to the Church's mission of fostering reconciliation. Samson Mijah [34] notes that the religious and ethnic aspects of the conflicts between herdsmen and farmers represent a critical source of insecurity in Nigeria's Middle Belt region. Research conducted by OpenDoor and the Christian Association of Nigeria [35] reveals that the frequent confrontations between Fulani herdsmen and agriculturalists lead to violence, forced displacement, and considerable socio-political tensions. Sunday Bobai Agang [36] argues that ethnic, religious, and political violence has profoundly shaped the evolution of culture, religion, and politics in the region.

3.4.3. Corruption and Systemic Injustice

Corruption and ineffective governance are pervasive issues that further compound the suffering experienced by the populace. In Nigeria, corruption is a systemic challenge that undermines both governance and the rule of law. According to Transparency International [37], Nigeria ranks 145 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perception Index, indicating its status as one of the most corrupt nations globally. This corruption diverts resources intended for public welfare and diminishes trust in governmental institutions, thereby perpetuating cycles of injustice and inequality. I. S. Ogundiya [38] points out that funds designated for development initiatives are frequently misappropriated, resulting in critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure being severely underfunded. This situation has fostered a cycle of deprivation that impacts millions of Nigerians on a daily basis. W. Adegbile [39] asserts that "bad politics or governance is therefore in no way beneficial to the wellbeing of the people of a nation. The bad choices and actions of political leaders consequently turn things upside down and spell poverty in the lives of the masses."

3.4.4. Environmental Degradation and Health Crises

The degradation of the environment and the impacts of climate change represent significant sources of distress, particularly in the Niger Delta region. The consequences of oil spills and gas flaring have led to the destruction of ecosystems, the loss of livelihoods, and serious health issues for the

local population. Scholars such as Eghosa E. Osaghae [40] have posited that the environmental crisis in this area is deeply intertwined with systemic injustice and corruption, which further marginalizes the affected communities. Additionally, Ken Saro-Wiwa [41], a notable activist from the region, described this situation as “environmental genocide,” highlighting the exploitation of vulnerable populations for the benefit of national economic interests. The plight of these communities is exacerbated by insufficient healthcare systems, rendering many Nigerians susceptible to diseases such as malaria, HIV/AIDS, and more recently, COVID-19.

In light of these adversities, religion occupies a pivotal position within Nigerian society. Churches frequently serve as bastions of hope and comfort, providing both spiritual and material assistance to those in distress. Nevertheless, the Church's approach to addressing suffering has faced scrutiny. Certain congregations prioritize prosperity theology, which emphasizes material wealth while overlooking the structural injustices that contribute to ongoing suffering. An alternative theological perspective rooted in the Incarnation calls for a deeper engagement. By highlighting God's solidarity with human suffering, the Church is urged to embody Christ's mission of healing and liberation. This entails not only meeting immediate needs through charitable actions but also advocating for systemic reforms to tackle the underlying causes of suffering.

4. Key Findings and Summary

The research indicates that the doctrine of the Incarnation underscores God's connection to human suffering, encourages compassionate involvement, and strengthens the pursuit of justice. This theological principle, which posits that God became human through Jesus Christ, carries significant implications for addressing the plight of individuals in Nigeria. It illustrates God's solidarity with humanity and serves as a framework for the Church's response to issues such as poverty, violence, and systemic injustice. The Church in Nigeria can embody the essence of the Incarnation by engaging in comprehensive ministry, promoting reconciliation, and tackling systemic challenges through social advocacy.

4.1. Solidarity with the Suffering and Hope

Incarnation illustrates God's alignment with the vulnerable, oppressed, and suffering individuals. Through Christ, God entered into the depths of human anguish and despair, as noted in John 1:14. This divine connection urges the Church in Nigeria to stand alongside those facing poverty, displacement, and marginalization. Liberation theology, as articulated by Gutiérrez [18], highlights God's preferential concern for the impoverished and the necessity for justice-driven ministry. This viewpoint is particularly pertinent in Nigeria, where a significant portion of the population lives in poverty and endures the ramifications of systemic inequality. Moltmann [16] asserts that “In the crucified Christ, God identified him-

self with the suffering of the world, becoming the God who suffers with humanity.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer [42] in his work *Ethics*, argues that the Incarnate Christ compels Christians to take responsibility for their neighbors and the broader world. F. A. Oye-oluwa [43] emphasizes that Jesus exemplifies the principle of need-based evangelism through His acts of compassion, healing, and the proclamation of the Gospel.

Worship serves as a profound avenue for addressing suffering while simultaneously proclaiming hope. Liturgical practices rooted in the Incarnation offer solace and motivate individuals to take action. Liturgies that incorporate prayers for the impoverished, the ill, and the marginalized serve as a reminder to congregants of their obligation to attend to those in distress. Such intercessions can also enhance communal unity and foster a collective sense of accountability. As noted by P. Kama and J. S. Klaasen [44], the inculturation of liturgy enables believers to find their identity within a specific cultural framework. Celebrations, shared meals, and various liturgical events embody the incarnational principle of communal existence. These practices promote cohesion, support among members, and uphold the dignity of all participants, irrespective of their economic circumstances. The Eucharist, which commemorates Christ's sacrifice, acts as a poignant reminder of divine presence amid human suffering. For Christians in Nigeria, engaging in the Eucharist can galvanize a dedication to embodying Christ's mission of justice and compassion in their everyday lives.

The eschatological aspect of the Incarnation offers hope to those facing adversity. The death and resurrection of Jesus affirm that suffering and mortality do not hold the ultimate authority but are transformed through divine intervention. N. T. Wright [45], a distinguished New Testament scholar, emphasizes that the Incarnation and resurrection of Jesus are fundamentally intertwined, forming the bedrock of Christian hope. Moltmann's [46] *Theology of Hope* posits that Christian hope transcends mere escapism; it is a dynamic force that urges believers to strive for the manifestation of God's kingdom on earth. This hope empowers Nigerian Christians to endure challenges, placing their trust in God's promise of renewal and restoration, as articulated in Romans 8:18–25. The Incarnation stands as a symbol of hope in a world fraught with existential uncertainties and crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, political turmoil, and environmental challenges. It affirms that God is not indifferent to the world's suffering but is actively engaged in the process of healing and redemption.

4.2. Advocacy for Justice, Reconciliation, Peace, and Good Governance

The Church's mission in Nigeria is fundamentally rooted in the advocacy for justice and peace, mirroring the incarnational ministry of Christ. The pervasive corruption in Nigeria has exacerbated poverty and suffering, eroding public confidence in governmental institutions. Motivated by the example of the Incarnate Christ, the Church is called to champion transparen-

cy, accountability, and fair distribution of resources. Christ's confrontation with oppressive systems and his call for justice are encapsulated in his mission statement found in Luke 4:18–19, which emphasizes the importance of delivering good news to the impoverished and liberating the oppressed. This mission transcends mere spiritual emancipation, encompassing the need to tackle systemic injustices and foster an environment conducive to peace. The prophet Micah articulates this call to action, stating, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic 6:8, NIV). In the context of Nigeria, where corruption, violence, and entrenched inequalities continue to inflict suffering on the populace, the doctrine of the Incarnation compels the Church to advocate for significant societal transformation.

The impact of ethno-religious conflicts has left profound wounds in Nigerian society, particularly in the Middle Belt and Northern regions, resulting in extensive violence and displacement. The call of the Incarnation urges Christians to engage in the ministry of reconciliation, as highlighted in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19. Nigerian Christians are encouraged to emulate the Incarnate Christ, referred to as the “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6), and to actively promote peace, with their peacemaking efforts standing resilient against violence. Ronald J. Sider [47] asserts that non-violence ultimately prevails over violence. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama (48), a notable Catholic figure in Nigeria, has persistently advocated for forgiveness and reconciliation, even amidst ongoing turmoil. He poignantly states, “If we do not forgive, we will never have peace.”

The Church, embodying the incarnational model exemplified by Christ, is tasked with serving as a prophetic voice that reveals corrupt practices while advocating for transparency and accountability. In a manner akin to Jesus' condemnation of the hypocrisy exhibited by religious leaders (Matthew 23:23), the Church is compelled to critique unethical conduct within political and economic frameworks. This prophetic mission resonates with Moltmann's [16] assertion that God's solidarity with human suffering urges Christians to confront societal injustices. Prominent African theologians such as Maluleke, Boesak, Mbiti, Mugambi, Katongole, and Adamo contribute valuable theological insights that support the pursuit of justice and good governance. Their scholarship underscores the Church's prophetic duty to challenge oppression and foster ethical governance. By anchoring their arguments in the principles of the Incarnation and biblical teachings, these scholars provide a strategic framework for addressing the governance issues facing Africa in a manner that is both transformative and restorative.

4.3. Practical Compassion and Care to Human Suffering

The Incarnation underscores the necessity of action over mere words. Jesus exemplified this through his acts of healing the sick, feeding the hungry, and comforting those in

mourning, thereby illustrating practical love and compassion. In a similar vein, the Nigerian Church is called to alleviate human suffering through various initiatives, including trauma counseling, healthcare outreach, and economic empowerment programs. By engaging in these efforts, the Church mirrors the incarnational mission of Christ, who stated that he came “not to be served, but to serve” (Mark 10:45).

The Incarnation compels the Church to engage in ministry directed towards those in distress, providing both spiritual and practical assistance. Matthew H. Kukah [49] asserts that pastoral care is vital in combating poverty in Nigeria, as it offers spiritual, emotional, and material aid to individuals and communities facing hardship. The legacy of conflict and displacement in Nigeria has resulted in widespread trauma among its citizens. The Church is positioned to deliver counseling services that merge psychological insights with theological understanding, facilitating healing and instilling hope in individuals. It is imperative to implement pastoral care training programs for both clergy and lay leaders to prepare them for this essential ministry. By nurturing a sense of community and mutual aid, the Church can assist Nigerians in overcoming the adversities associated with poverty and insecurity. Furthermore, initiatives such as microfinance schemes, skills training workshops, and community health outreach can empower individuals to restore their lives and enhance the overall well-being of society.

4.4. Transformational Leadership and Ethical Governance

Transformational leadership exemplifies ethical governance, as illustrated by Christ's servant leadership, who stated that he came “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). This principle encourages leaders to prioritize the welfare of their communities. In Nigeria, where failures in leadership have intensified suffering, the Church has the potential to mentor and cultivate ethical leaders who embody Christ's humility and selflessness. Such an approach can play a significant role in rebuilding trust and promoting societal transformation.

Church leaders are urged to reflect the humility and compassion exemplified by Christ in their ministries. This requires a departure from self-serving behaviors and a commitment to prioritizing the well-being of their congregations. H. Mdingi [50] advocates for a leadership model based on the concept of Kenosis, which emphasizes self-emptying in service. Training initiatives focused on ethical leadership and theological education grounded in the principles of the Incarnation can empower leaders to fulfill their roles effectively. The Church has the potential to cultivate a new generation of leaders dedicated to upholding integrity and advocating for social justice. By implementing mentorship programs, hosting theological seminars, and engaging in public advocacy, the Church can motivate Christians involved in politics, business, and education to lead in accordance with Christ-

like principles.

4.5. A Brief Restatement of the Study Findings

The findings of the study indicate that the Incarnation underscores God's solidarity with human suffering and serves as a framework for hope, compassion, and transformative action. In Nigeria, the pervasive issues of poverty, insecurity, corruption, and systemic inequality significantly contribute to human suffering. The relevance of the Incarnation is highlighted in its capacity to inspire the Church to undertake holistic ministry that addresses both spiritual and socio-economic issues. Nigerian churches are particularly well-positioned to embody the Incarnation through charitable acts, advocacy for justice, and initiatives aimed at reconciliation. The results underscore the imperative for the Church to confront the underlying causes of suffering while promoting systemic changes that advance equity and justice.

5. Conclusion

The doctrine of the Incarnation represents a significant theological concept that holds considerable relevance in contemporary society, especially within the Nigerian context. It underscores God's empathy towards human suffering and provides a framework for confronting issues such as poverty, injustice, and conflict. The Church is thus called to embody the mission of Christ, which encompasses compassion, justice, and hope. This article has examined the biblical and historical underpinnings of the Incarnation, its implications for solidarity with those in distress, and its practical applications for the Nigerian Church. By embracing its prophetic mission, offering pastoral care, fostering peace, and proclaiming a message of eschatological hope, the Church can illuminate the path for a nation in search of renewal. Ultimately, the Incarnation serves as a reminder that God is intimately involved in our struggles, actively seeking to redeem and restore the world. For Nigeria, this truth presents a transformative vision of hope, urging all believers to engage in God's mission of healing and renewal.

6. Recommendations

In order to effectively alleviate human suffering in Nigeria through the theological perspective of the Incarnation, several recommendations are put forth. First, it is essential to enhance theological education that emphasizes the practical implications of the Incarnation, thereby equipping church leaders for meaningful social engagement. Second, the Church should be encouraged to advocate for justice by challenging corruption, promoting ethical governance, and supporting systemic reforms. Third, expanding pastoral care to include trauma counseling and mental health support for victims of violence and oppression is crucial. Additionally,

fostering peace through interfaith dialogue and grassroots initiatives can help address ethno-religious conflicts. Community empowerment should also be prioritized by investing in social programs such as skill development, microfinance, and healthcare to uplift marginalized populations. Finally, integrating themes of solidarity and hope into worship practices can inspire collective action aimed at societal transformation, while mentoring Christians in leadership roles will promote ethical leadership within the community.

Abbreviations

NIV	New International Version
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
WB	World Bank
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease-2019

Author Contributions

David Luka Gofwan is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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