




# The Bible as source for leadership models: a considered No and a careful Yes<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

In this contribution, earlier research by the author on the topic of leadership and the Bible is expanded upon, here to evaluate the usage of the Bible in publications on leadership. By means of Weberian ideal-type analysis, some traits of such usage are indicated, and thereupon evaluated. This is done by theological characterisation, from the perspective of theological realism (post-secularism). Not a less evangelical, but a more evangelical approach is argued for, in which the natures of Bible, faith and believers are taken more seriously than their wished-for alternatives. The latter includes the oft-found confession to taking the Bible seriously, which however too often plays out as an empty assertion. This, because the realities of the historical coming-into-being of the biblical texts and corpora, are in such cases not given their due attention. The Bible confessed to is, then, a document that never existed. This implies that leadership insights derived on such a basis, leave much room for criticism as to their implied relation to reality.

**Keywords:** Bible, leadership, critical hermeneutics, post-secularism, religious realism

## Introduction

“Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea” (Colossians 4:15, NKJV)

At religious retreats and church youth camps and such events with the intent of nurturing faith within a concentrated time, a day-long reflection exercise is at times introduced, meant to give some structure and a biblical base to the intended spiritual development. Each person writes down a favourite Bible verse on a piece of paper and puts it in a basket. During the early-morning devotion, the basket is circulated, and everyone takes a paper from the collection, reads the verse and reflects on it during the day. At the evening devotion, everyone who wants to, can tell the group what the Bible verse was which they drew and what it had meant to them during that day.

The piety involved in such an exercise, is plain to see. The expectations that the Word of God simply *would* speak to you; better said: that God *shall* speak to you via the Bible verse, are clear (from wide reading related to this field and from long-term church-related involvement related to this topic). Such an expected internal communication (De Klerk, 1988:29–35, Waaijman, 2002:584–588; cf. Beyers, 2022:789–799) is phenomenologically describable as a kind of inner whisper; in theological language, this would reflexively be described as the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jonker, 1982). The theology of the Word in these kind of *praxes pietatis*

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(cf. Van Wyk, 2011:131–139) is uncritical; pre-critical (cf. Deist, 1988; Ricoeur, 1967:350–352), even. It is associated more with pietism (which sprung most influentially from Spener, 1675) than with the more maturely reflective discernment traditions (cf. Waaijman, 2013:13–24). The problems that come along with such a biblical theology (or spirituality not far from that tradition, e.g. Sheriffs 1996), are amply evident to theologians, more versed in Biblical Studies (e.g. Snyman, 2007; Nürnberger, 2009; the newest but too set in modernist assumptions, Spangenberg, 2021).

Both because of my somewhat warped sense of humour but also to put to question, playfully, such an implied, let's call it "innocent" theology, the verse which I add to the basket on such occasions, is Colossians 4:15, "Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea". If the person who drew my verse contribution indeed does report on the day's journey with that pearl of wisdom (cf. Deist, 1978:58), it is usually in the form of a question, with a tone of slight exasperation, even desperation: Why would anyone choose such a verse? (Usually with this reflection exercise, the ones who chose the verses are, for the sake of humility, not expected to identify themselves, or in my case, to own up.) Or: How can this Bible verse at all mean something for me, here on this retreat or at this camp *etcetera*?

The latter is of course the point of my playful contribution to the verse basket, and the central theme of the rest of this contribution. The Calvinist, in particular, understanding of Scripture as Word of God, is namely that all parts of the Bible are equally inspired (cf. e.g. Blacketer, 2006:37–39)<sup>2</sup>. It is the expectation of Bible readers, therefore, that the Word *would*, with the implied meaning (based on an unspoken understanding of inspiration theory; cf. ) that God *shall* speak to us. These two aspects are central to early Reformation theology (cf. the careful study of Rossouw, 1963). As believing groups and also as individuals, the anticipation from every verse of Scripture is that the divine voice will be heard; at the very least, with some contextually sensitivity, from every pericope.

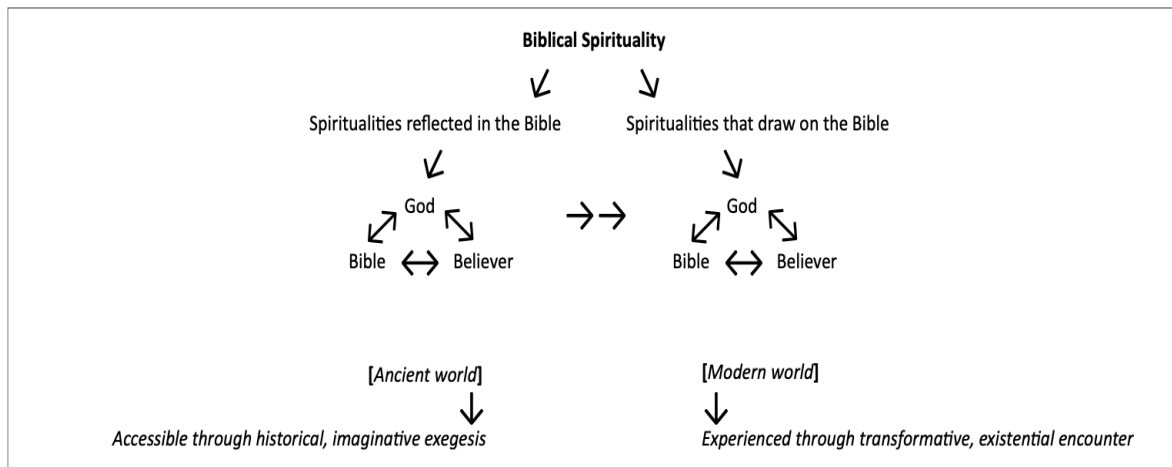
The difficulties this Reformed confession brings, form a part of the call to Biblical Studies and the Bible languages for, precisely, future *verbi divini ministri*; the more so, for doctorated theologians. Outside such theologically educated circles, the call to Bible studies, in groups or individually and at the hand of good books on the Good Book, parallels this ministerial call. In this too, the equality of the believers *coram Dei* in a manner parallels the equality of all parts of Scripture, which brings as corollaries finely technical explanations and formulations. With this is already given, part of the matrix of aspects involved in reviewing the topic of the Bible as source for leadership models and metaphors. These parts of the interpretative framework, are (cf. Lombaard, 2014:205–225):

- What the Bible is, and / versus what it is expected to be;
- How the Bible communicates, and / versus how it is expected to communicate.

This had elsewhere (Lombaard, 2011:3, applied in Van der Merwe, 2012:182), on how Bible and faith may be illustrated as relating to one another, been summarised as:

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<sup>2</sup> In popular discussions (but also in publications such as Abelinyaregh & Iordaa, 2022:421–436) on these matters, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 is often drawn on (cf. Murphy, 1997), almost always decontextualised. Incisively, given the anachronisms, such discussions rarely take into account that neither canons of the New Testament (from c. 170, with the *canon Muratori*, until ± 400, with the inclusion of John 8,) or the Old (canonised concluded in ± the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century), had come into existence when the deutero-Pauline letter 2 Timothy was written, ± 100. As just the briefest summary.



Briefly to explain this model:

- It is based on the assumption that, historically (phenomenologically and anthropologically), faith precedes Scripture, and that, foundationally (theologically), God supersedes the Bible in importance within a living faith (though the latter order is reversed in biblicism and / or fundamentalism);
- The Bible had come into being through a range of relationships between God and believers (with the “range of relationships” explaining the diversities and contradictions, and more, found in the Bible);
- The Bible has continued later / current influence through a range of relationships between God and believers (with the “range of relationships” explaining the diversities and contradictions, and more, found amongst Christians and, less openly visible<sup>3</sup>, in wider circles).

It is from this frame of reference that what follows, proceeds.

### **An ideal-type analysis applied to some influential publications**

The frame of reference outlined above, will below be brought to bear on some influential publications on the Bible and leadership, doing so methodologically at the hand of an ideal-typical description in the tradition of Weber (cf. e.g. Weber, 1904; Załęski, 2010:319–326).

This entails that a range of publications are below analysed together, without specifying each occurrence or publication in every instance. Indeed, none of the publications included will normally measure up to every aspect of the ideal-typical description. The latter always averages characteristics, condensing aspects of the subject matter as they present themselves, though without implying — as is at times erroneously expected — that these abridgements are valid in all cases described. This method provides shorthand insight; an

<sup>3</sup> “Less openly visible”, that is, to eyes conditioned by modernism and, differently, by post-modernism, as the two prominent expressions of “secularism” over recent centuries.

From a post-secular / a-secular / religiously realist / theologically realist (- these terms are all being tested as possibly appropriate names for our unfolding era) perspective, the religious, and in Western/ised societies, Christian, influences are fully palpable. (Outside of broadly Western/ised societies, the a-religious / atheist — “secularist” as commonly used since Holyoake, 1896, is a misnomer; cf. Vanhoutte, 2020:1–9 — as an orientation of or towards society, has nowhere confessed to. Within Western/ised societies, this profession was both superficial, which is preferable, and false, which is currently therefore self-correcting, albeit slowly.)



estimation<sup>4</sup>. In such a manner, a phenomenological description is offered, at a distance (which does not imply the false, not to forget impossible, sense of “objectivity” at times associated with earlier phenomenology; cf. e.g. Husserl, 1936; Kjosavik, Beyer & Fricke, 2019), in order to convey something highlighted, for the sake of shared understanding, about the subject matter. This method distils greater amounts of information to a meaningful essence. It does so without the pretence of being all-encompassing, for precisely the reason that it attempts to summarise with clarity.

The subject matter is, to this end, read and presented charitably; at least, initially. This kind of reading-and-summary is undertaken with a sense of fairness, in providing a sympathetic, or perhaps empathetic, description of what is analysed. The same is expected of also of the analysis provided: the minutiae of the interpretation are easily criticisable; the broad impression, though, aims at validity. In describing, or rewording, the reality in this manner below, the “world” in which these publications are borne and the shared, much larger “world” which from their influence may be inferred, at first a less evaluative stance is taken. On such an initial re-representative summary of that reality, or “world”, follows the interpretative and hence evaluative engagement.

The primary texts which are to be analysed, chosen based on their wide-ranging influence in the English-speaking world, but not meant to be a representative sample of the publications in this field (cf. on such purposive sampling e.g. Emmel, 2013:33–44), were:

- Barna, G. (2006). *A fish out of water. 9 strategies to maximize your God-given leadership potential*. Nashville: Integrity Publishers;
- *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, published since 2007 by Regent University, includes a good-sized collection of articles published on this topic, though of differing scholarly quality;
- Maxwell, J.C. & Elmore, T. (2007). *The Maxwell leadership Bible. Lessons in leadership from the Word of God* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers;

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<sup>4</sup> Towards greater clarity on this methodology, this parallels for instance the descriptions of “national characteristics”, wrought as such renderings may be. Zimbabweans may for instance be described as exceptionally friendly, giving people; with good schooling and as generally people-oriented, they are hard-working and loyal employees, also maintaining hearty, caring, trusting friendships. Germans may be described as well-organised, detail-oriented people; as individualists, they make good, critically-minded employees, maintaining friendly relations, though at a respectful distance, precisely because they care for the wellbeing of other individuals.

In making such descriptions, nobody assumes all Germans or all Zimbabweans meet these criteria; we know very well that these are generalisations, substantively valid if not in precise details or in all respects. Certainly, universal applicability is not expected, both in relation to the nationalities described (the observed) and from the experiences of those who might offer such characterisations (the observers). Yet, in general these qualities seem most probably justifiable and reasonably sound; broadly speaking, that is, based as they are on personal experience and on depictions in literature, in motion pictures and in media discussions. These distinctions may also have been caricaturised in humour, and perhaps prejudiced in negative stereotypes. These traits, even if with only positively-intentioned attribution, are therefore recognisable; almost instantly so.

Moreover, some shared distinctions of these nationalities remained unmentioned, such as personal integrity and moral discipline — both of which apply to Zimbabweans and Germans. Those may be presumed from the descriptions. Nor are all characteristics described: a critical mass of such impressions, clichés and achieves enough of a sense of familiarity, that most people (not all) who are familiar with these nationalities, may well nod in acknowledgement. The descriptions were namely offered charitably and sympathetically, and on their part expect the same from those who encounter such descriptions. Certainly critical orientations to these kinds of descriptions are welcome; usually, though, they are of the nature of expansion or amelioration, rather than outright rejection. This, precisely because *the tendered generalities generally ring true*.



- Whittington, J.L. (2016). *Biblical perspectives on leadership and organizations*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

These readings took place, however, as always, not within a vacuum (cf. e.g. Trede & Loftus, 2010:185–195). Prior readings, for the sakes of interest and of research, in the formats of textbooks and journalism, and in the fora of training courses and academic conferences, had shaped expectations. The impressions then formed, were the expectations that informed and steered the readings undertaken here. As with all intellectual engagement, a *tabula rasa* starting point here was not possible; such is the nature of being human. Nor would that be desirable, since research requires advanced thinking, rather than a first-encounter kind of experience.

Hence, apart from the framework outlined above, the texts which informed, though in quite diverse ways, the subsequent analysis, were primarily (the secondary and tertiary influences from decades of scholarly work on biblical texts, are impossible to acknowledge):

- Akanet, E.D. (May 2007). *Reclaiming ECWA believers' identity and sense of belonging in Christ: a problem of Christian identity* (DMin dissertation). Wilmore, KY: Asbury Theological Seminary.
- Barentsen, J., van den Heuvel, S.C. & Kessler, V. (eds) (2017). *Increasing diversity: loss of control or adaptive identity construction?* Leuven: Peeters.
- Deist, F. (1994). *Ervaring, rede en metode in Skrifuitleg. 'n Wetenskapshistoriese ondersoek na Skrifuitleg in die Ned. Geref. Kerk 1840-1990*. Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing.
- Kok, J. & Van den Heuvel, S. (eds) (2018). *Leading in a VUCA World. Integrating leadership, discernment and spirituality*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Deist, F. (1988). *Witnesses to the Old Testament*. Pretoria, NG Kerkboekhandel.

### **Interpretative-analytical description and evaluative interpretation**

Following on the above, the following ideal-typical presentation of the Bible-leadership relationship as encountered in the texts analysed, can be put forward:

The Bible is a book like no other; specifically: beyond all other books. Therefore, it by definition holds special value on the topic leadership too. God created everything, also the Bible and also leadership, and since we are created in God's image, we too must lead. We do so from the Bible. Our vision must align with God's vision. With figures such as Adam and Eve, the three patriarchs of Israel, Joseph and Moses, David, the prophets and many others, and certainly last but not first, Jesus, to emulate, our ordained gifts include leadership, which means to influence others in appropriate ways. Also negative aspects and examples of leadership are displayed in the Bible. Indeed, almost every name mentioned in the Bible can be linked to at least one positive or negative leadership trait, which serves for us as a prototype.

One's talents of leadership should, as a believer, be developed from the Bible, if you are to be faithful, or obedient or grateful, in the church and in the world. The Bible, essentially reliable in text and message to present us with above-human truth, with implications of eternal validity, in every part has the capacity to convey important ideas of leadership to us. The virtues of perseverance, reliance on God — humility — and on other believers — servant or shepherd

leadership — and other important principles, can be deduced from the Bible. There are key texts in this regard, worthy of being quoted often (e.g. Proverbs 29:18 and 1 Peter 5:1-9), but essentially the whole of Scripture contains such teachings. Therefore, as with other key teachings of Christianity, leadership truths can be unearthed from the Bible, where they are implied, like buried gems. If not blueprints, then at least good examples are given in the Bible of what would be apt leadership, and what would be bad, for believers to follow or to avoid. The Bible is filled with such lessons on leadership.



How may this be characterised? Not the Bible texts themselves are studied, for their own sake, but are read for our sake: something valuable lies within what the Bible tells *us*. Therein lies the kernel.

The true value of the Bible is not in its own self, but in what it conveys about matters such as leadership. This communicative depth is the divine intent, for which we should mine the Bible. Such nuggets of wisdom are clearly present in the Bible, yet somehow they are not: they first had to be explicitly shown for us then to see such value there. And then we can see what had in fact always been there. God's objectives on leadership, which were always present but in a way not visible to us, are now unveiled — like a mystery cult, providing a new light on what had thus far not been realised by Bible readers. Now we have the message. With the key provided, the value of the Bible has been unravelled; its coherent and also unifying theme, has now been laid before us. This is akin to a revelation, albeit a kind of revelation from the revelation that is the Bible. Because something is the case in the Bible, it has value for us, either to imitate or to evade, in how we practice leadership. It provides lessons for today; the Scriptures are brim-full of guidance, ideas and examples for us; on leadership too.

God intended it that way; that is — slightly too extremely formulated — why the Bible was given to us. We *learn* from the Good Book; this knowledge, here on leadership, sets us free to be better children of God and better human beings, in service of kingdom and humanity — as leaders, all.

The Bible is there not for its own sake; it is not meant to collect what had happened in the past. Such a view would render the Bible a dead book, like a language no longer spoken. Rather, those histories are recorded, with a view to carry ancient insights forward to us. The latter is the important part. We, and our times, are the (best?) beneficiaries of the enterprises of faith, history, inspiration and more that led to the Bible being written. The Bible is the Word of God, because it speaks to us. It is not holy of itself, in the sense that Bible texts should be studied for their own sake; that is, to understand how they came into being and what they had intended to convey in ancient times. That would amount to an esoteric treatment of Scripture; it would render the Bible, in a sense, useless to us. Only if the Bible has value for our current-day concerns, such as leadership, does it have full, or perhaps real, worth.

By implication, if the Bible does not speak to us, on the issues we put before it, it does not speak. And what would be the point of such a Bible?

Such a treatment may be described as a functionalist view of the Bible. The canon is not an artefact from the past, difficult to understand. Rather, it is our book; it speaks primarily to us. It does so clearly, on issues that we regard as important and which we then lay before it. What we bring to the text, the text would respond to; in the same way as I can in prayer bring anything to God, I can also bring modern leadership concerns, for instance, to the Holy Book.

Naturally, there would be answers.

Answers? — At least in the sense that something definitive can be said.

Naturally? — Rather, supernaturally, given the property of inspiration associated with the Bible.

Almost like a book of magic spells we read about in fairy tales of old, and still in wildly popular books for children of all ages, formulae are there, in the Bible text, to draw on. Doing so gives special power to the insight now attained or reinforced, “for the Bible tells me so” — as the children's song goes.

### **Additional contextualising remarks, and a different kind of evangelical Yes**

Clearly, this kind of view of the Bible, here presented too strongly, even slightly caricatured, for the sake of bringing across the point, is not sustainable. It views the Bible as something it had never been. The historical processes that led to the Bible, the ways in which its texts had come into being,



the initially highly relevant texts-in-their-contexts, are glossed over. The inferences that can be drawn from this, are indicated in the following paragraphs.

This kind of approach as summarised, may be described as confessional, because it seems to take the Bible as point of orientation. But it confesses a book that had never been, that doing a good cause harm by poor practice. That kind of practice seems to imbue the Bible texts with, in a sense, magical qualities it does not have. Such a view therefore expects of God a book that God did not give us. The Bible that has been given the church, as much as broader humanity, is fully different. It is namely fully normal and natural. Such a view as described above, similarly places faith on a pedestal, in the category of the unusual, as if only then faith would be a credible, or perhaps a worthy, orientation. In such thinking, both faith and the Bible are placed in the category of the non-human, regarding such gifts as not of this world; as strange to this world. Such a dualist view of faith is unbiblical.

Faith is, in a realist sense, something completely ordinary. It is inherent to humanity. There is no possibility of a human not being of faith (in all its variance) — in the same manner as we are with language, with technique, with our physical senses, with imagination, along with a range of other tangle and intangible, but nevertheless entirely real (such as hope, love, respect, rights, duties, etc.), aspects. (This expands on the seminal contribution in this regard by Van Huyssteen 2006.) There is thus nothing special about faith, because it is common to all humanity; more theologically stated: it is given to all humanity. Nor is religious belief elevated, as it is assigned within us; it has only this placement. Faith, respectively belief, respectively religion, respectively spirituality, meant here roughly synonymously, is as normal as a piece of bread or an apple in a tree. So is the Bible. This is how God has given us faith-and-Bible.

If such non-realist views on the Bible and on living from the Bible as summarised above are unacceptable, what then would be a different, better way in which to relate to the Bible?

That the Bible, the Judaeo-Christian faith and aspects of Christian thought and practice fill most parts of our lives, is increasingly being acknowledged, as the post-secular culture awakens (in) the Western(ised) world. There is nothing, simply culturally and phenomenologically speaking, that is not drenched in the heritage of Bible-and-faith. That condition is an inescapable part of the life into which we had been borne (our “*Geworfenheit*”; cf. Heidegger, 1927:178–239). Bible-and-faith is implied in all we hold dear.

Continuing on this post-secular note: whether people in this broad cultural stream overtly acknowledge as much or not, we are in highly complex ways compound beings, which includes the biblical-Christian heritage as much as many other influences, intermingled. Our reality is that we are constituted by, and we draw on, many entwined backgrounds. In all that we undertake, therefore (here recouped from Lombaard, 2001:86):

our faith and practices are born “neither from the whole of the Bible, nor from the Bible alone” (Deist 1978:58). Our faith is rather (in)formed by (expanding on Wogaman 1993:1–22) Scripture, Christian history and tradition, experience, our thoughts and actions and those of others, the church, philosophy, societal norms and practices – all these and more, in different and ever changing measures. Such is the path of individual and communal Christian faith...

That the Bible will in this way, along with the ordinarily occurring other range of influences, consequently affect what is said about leadership, how it is practiced and the critical reflection on this natural human phenomenon, is an organic given. (The foundational studies on leadership, which in different ways relate to the Bible and faith, remain instructive: Weber, 1920; Lewin, Lippit & White, 1939:271–301.) Through discriminating and indirect (i.e. non-linearly direct) reflection, the Bible forms as much a part of the chorus of other voices too, which give form to one’s Christian identity. This Christian identity<sup>5</sup> constitutes the basis for all that we as believers are, do and say.

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<sup>5</sup> That this expression is at times hijacked in cultural politics to denote something along the lines of exclusion, is a great shame. The sense here is the opposite. On the early church, cf. e.g. Lieu,



That includes, how we lead and analyse leadership. These activities do not obligate including directly, in decontextualising ways, the Bible, so as thereby to characterise our current acts as consequently Christian, biblical or pious. Such a forcibly-enacted insertion of the Bible is neither evangelical nor faith nurturing; often, if unintentionally, the opposite.

By the latter is meant, that particularly informed and culturally engaged readers of all kinds of media and literature, are not attracted by that kind of Bible usage. Society and individuals expect better, because they reflexively know, from solid experience, what texts say and what texts may accordingly, with legitimacy rather than by distortion (deliberate “spin” or mistaken, though sincere, misrepresentation), be said to have said. With new generations raised, and a whole international culture now accustomed to, our era in which every webpage, news item and smartphone text is read critically, with instant appraisal, our contemporaries are textually aware on a scale that has never before been the case.

Poorly relating to the Bible, or poorly relating the Bible to a current matter, hence intuitively deters non-Christians and progressively alienates Christians; also conservatively-oriented Christians. They can instantly recognise that the Bible texts could not have said what they are at times said to have said: “if its study was trivialised but usage maximised ... [we find] ‘dis-use’, ‘re-use’ and ‘misuse’ of the Bible” (Bortey-Anum, 2017). Expanding on Beyers (2024), people in such instances are then led to question the legitimacy of the church, faith, God and so forth. That would be the opposite of the intent when, usually, the Bible is employed in such non-realist ways as summarised above, as a source for, for instance, leadership models, ideas and ideals.

This does not reflect a less evangelical attitude towards Scripture than the usual in church or confessional circles, but the opposite: it is a more evangelical orientation. The point made immediately above is not to let the Bible be. Rather, to let the Bible be what it is. It is not a wished-for Scripture. The Bible should be treated on its terms; not ours.

Then we too can be treated on its terms; that is, that we interpreted by Scripture (cf. Rossouw, 1963); we are open to being transformed (Lombaard, 2015:1–6, drawing on Waaijman, 2002). The less evangelical way is the one described in ideal-typical fashion above. That is, the Bible is treated on our terms.

## Conclusion

Scripture is expected to echo to us what we already affirm and now wish the Bible, or a part of it, the reaffirm. In other words, in such circumstances we remain busy with ourselves, as starting point and as end point. The Bible has then become simply a mediating point in this circle of interpretation; confessionally central, but in reality, on the hermeneutical margins. We then do not live from the Bible, intentions and assertions despite. The roles are reversed: the Bible lives for us. So to speak; that is, in the role it is afforded, in practice, by us. Its relevance is in such treatments recognised only if it gives voice to our interests, which we lay before it, by this kind of cultural convention.

The Bible has then been reduced to something akin to a talisman or mascot, or almost a lucky charm of sorts, or perhaps a soothsaying totem. Scripture is then an icon not in the classical tradition of the church, in which God speaks to us through the image. Rather, in the instrumentalist tradition, we as it were speak through the Bible, to ourselves, for ourselves, in our interest. That is an ideological treatment of the Bible; not a faithful one.

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1998:71–82; on the current church, cf. e.g. Moody & Reed, 2017:33–40; foundationally, Niebuhr, 1975.





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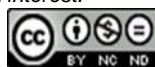
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