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Biblical Ethics, Children, and Youth in the African Church: Towards Transforming African Theology and the Role of Youth and Children in the Church

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Abstract

Scholars of Christian theology, such as Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, have offered diverse interpretations of biblical texts, often shaped by their moral and ethical frameworks within the fields of theology and philosophy, reflecting the interplay between scripture and prevailing cultural, philosophical, and doctrinal contexts. There is no doubt secularism has split Christianity into a two-fold polarity that stands between the world of today and the word of God. As the sociologist Peter Berger has noted, the process of secularisation has led to a decline in religious authority (Berger 1967: 107), further deepening this divide between the sacred and the secular. This paper evaluates biblical ethics and compares it with various approaches adopted from the perspective of the global south to understand Christian faith. I argue that there is a distinction between the divinely revealed message of the Bible and the perception that is conditioned by our culture and traditions which are subject to change. This perception has led to the view of Christianity in the global south as an inheritance from the global north. In the current era of postmodernism, the global north is progressively becoming secular, which has contributed to the emergency of liberal theology. There are different factions of theological schools of thought in Christianity. The question that ought to be asked is: who gets to decide what is the truth? In my quest to respond to this query, I focus on a Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-empowered approach to evaluate the

ramifications of secularism in African theology. As a means of exploring this theme, my focus is further narrowed to reflect on the role played by youth and children in the church in sustaining the continuity of Christianity in the global south. Findings and recommendations suggested in this paper will contribute to the empowerment of the global south to uphold a Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-empowered approach to theological issues.

Introduction

There is inadequate literature regarding theological discussions in the African church about the involvement of youth and children in shaping the direction and future of the African church (Gathogo 2022:16). It is about time that Christian religious ministries in Africa started to listen to their young ones. Addressing youth and children in the church not only introduces a religious perspective to the discussion but that of different worldviews as well. It is broadly true that the global south and the African church at large has remained conservative and this has been so because of the dominant cultural and traditional practices that blend with religion (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020:14). However, there is a lot at play regarding worldviews and modern Christianity amongst the youth and children in the African church (Cartledge and Davies 2013:27). The division between the elderly and the young in the African church comes from Western culture's influence more than from changes in Christian theology (van Klinken 2017:42). While decisions by Western communities and the global north at large are theologically informed by human rights, the global south, particularly Africa, is making religious decisions based on an understanding of good and evil (Martin 2010:56). This in some perspectives is referred to as the humanity approach (Ogbonnaya 2016:1).

In the current societal setting of the global south, it is not enough to just talk of Christian theological teachings without factoring in the cultural changes within the population demographics that comprise the African church (Fatokun 2005:362). In general, population statistics in the African continent indicate that a large section of the population in most countries comprise young people as opposed to old people (Ndereba 2022:7). It is within this huge young population that the effect of change in culture and worldviews is being

drastically experienced in Africa. While the old Christian population in Africa is generally traditional as regards the principles and practice of Christian teaching, there is a mixed view of religion within the young Christian population (Bevans 2015:130). This has been greatly influenced by phenomena such as modernism and postmodernism. It speaks much to the fact that African Christian ministry will sooner or later have to battle with an emergent spring of mixed worldviews within the African church (Sundkler and Steed 2000:214). With the development of technology and the accompanying levels of exposure, there is definitely quite a lot of avenues from which the African youth are learning about religion (Okesson 2020:62). There is an apparent crisis within this young population as to what will be superior in their lives: religion or technology. The two are not mutually exclusive but there seems to be an uninformed tendency for an ignorant young population to choose one (van Klinken 2017:47). This is because modern technology, as marketed by the West, embraces science and encourages secularism more than it does religion (Bevans 2015:129). The question to be asked here is: why does Western culture assume moral righteousness and think of itself as superior to the African worldview?

While it is imperative for every society to uphold their standards and stand for their beliefs, it is necessary to evaluate our actions based on the truth as human beings. This leads to the dilemma that the African church is facing. On the one hand there is a problem of financial struggles due to poor economic status, and on the other hand there is financial support from the West at the expense of traditional Christian values (Gathogo 2022:19). This opens another door for controversial discussions within the African church. There is clearly a lack of understanding as to what informs our biblical ethics (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020:12). In some cases, religious ministers responsible for the spiritual nourishment of young people have adopted a certain religious model in which they try to blend modern culture with biblical teachings (Ndereba 2022:14). Whether this is right is a discussion out of the scope of this paper. Nonetheless there is an aspect by which such an approach is going to influence the future of the African church and its direction regarding biblical ethics (Fatokun 2005:363). It is one thing to acknowledge and believe in biblical teachings and it is entirely another thing to correctly understand those teachings and apply them in your life (Adedibu 2013). To better understand these dynamics, African Christian ministry ought to focus more on the topic of

biblical ethics and the role of the youth and children in shaping the future of Christianity in Africa.

While not always true, but largely true for the African church and most leadership positions in the African continent, the role of youth and children is often regarded as subordinate to that of old people (Okesson 2020:44). This is often true regardless of competency levels within different age groups (Adogame 2013:16). This is a practice that has largely flowed from traditional culture to religion and even politics. As circumstances keep changing, fundamentally the African church has no option other than capitalising on the role of children and the youth (Burgess 2011:436). There is a limited number of scholarly investigations that have examined this line of inquiry, and even the existing interventions have provided only theoretical approaches (Frescura 2015:72). This paper endeavours to address these pertinent issues that largely influence Christianity in the African church. A large population of Christians in Africa are currently youth and children (Ndereba 2022:7). In the midst of many, divergent worldviews threatening the position of Christian practice, it is important to understand the most vulnerable section of Christians, which is the youth and children. It is also important to learn the role this category plays within the African church and contrast that with biblical ethics.

Conceptual Framework and Key Definitions

This paper cuts across the interdisciplinary dialogue between biblical ethics, African theology, and youth and children ministry in the African church. The goal is to evaluate how the African church can uphold a Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led model of discipleship in a context marked by rapid social, cultural, and ideological transformation. Central to this framework is the interaction between theological doctrines and the sociocultural realities experienced by children and youth in contemporary Africa. The framework draws on biblical revelation as the foundational source of truth, while recognising the interconnectedness of culture, technology, postmodernism, and globalisation in shaping moral and theological worldviews among African youth.

Definition of Key Terms

- *Biblical ethics* refers to the moral principles and values derived from the teachings of the Bible, particularly those modelled in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. It is concerned with what is right and wrong according to scripture and how Christians are called to live in response to God's revealed will.
- *African theology* refers to a contextualised theological reflection that seeks to interpret the Christian faith through the lens of African cultural, historical, and social experiences. It often involves dialogue between biblical teachings and African traditional values and cosmologies.
- *Practical theology* refers to a branch of theology concerned with the application of biblical truths to lived Christian experience. It addresses the 'how' of ministry by integrating theological reflection with pastoral practice.
- *Youth and children ministry* refers to structured efforts by the church to engage, disciple, mentor, and empower young people and children in their spiritual development and leadership potential within the faith community.
- *Worldviews* are deeply held beliefs and assumptions that shape how individuals perceive reality, truth, morality, and human purpose. In this paper, *worldviews* refers to the competing perspectives (e.g., secular, technological, traditional, religious) influencing African youth today.
- *Secularism* refers to a worldview or social system in which religious influence is minimised or excluded from public and intellectual life, often promoting moral relativism and autonomy from divine authority.

These definitions are informed by the work of Bevans and Schroeder (2004), who emphasise the importance of contextual theology that remains faithful to

biblical revelation while engaging real-world challenges across diverse cultural settings.

The Need for Youth and Children in the African Church

It is widely believed that a society with no focus on their young ones is a society without a future (Bongmba 2015:19). The young in any society are an investment and a reservation of the societal values and traditions for use in the coming future. This is no different for the African church which, with no doubt, contains a huge percentage of youth and children who are potential leaders of the African church of tomorrow (Fatokun 2005:362). To address issues surrounding the youth and children in the African church, there is need for a holistic approach towards ministry forms including evangelism, preaching, music, teaching, and counselling (Adedibu 2013:411). This is because in terms of population demographics Africa is positioned as the youngest continent with a population of 1.2 billion people aged between 15 and 25 years (United Nations 2015:13). The World Economic Forum (2020) states that 77% of the population of Africa are people aged less than 35 years. It further projects an increase in this trajectory, with over 2.4 billion young people expected to inhabit urban centres in Africa by 2050. This demonstrates evidence for the need for youth and children in the African church. While these statistics indicate an apparent call to focus on youth and children, there still needs to be an assessment for the understanding and observance of biblical ethics in the entire setting of the African church (Gathogo 2022:21).

In the African social context, young people face a lot of challenges in their lives on a daily basis as opposed to their counterparts in Western societies (Knibbe 2011:479). Primarily, this is because in Africa transitioning to adulthood comes with a lot of responsibilities both socially and economically (Frescura 2015:71). Some of the challenges faced include economic instability with a high rate of unemployment, volatile political contexts, family problems, and an identity crisis brought about by a globalised-pluralism worldview (Gener 2016:62). This creates a segment of the population that is culturally diverse within a known, culturally homogenous people. For instance, in countries like Kenya, the last census report indicates that there is a difference in terms of population make-up between young people living in urban areas and those living in rural areas (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2020). Urban areas contain young people

of both local and international backgrounds who are a mixture of religious and nonreligious, while in rural areas a large portion of young people are religious and of local background (Ndereba 2022:14). Such demographics are essential for the African church in which this population occupies a special position. Additionally, it is important for African Christian ministry to consider the issue of mental health amongst young people in Africa. A high rate of crime and suicide is reported amongst young people aged less than 35 years in Africa (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020:16). This is contributed to by difficulties in coping with social pressure and drug abuse, amongst many other factors.

While technology is a whole new topic to be explored by the African church, it should not be lost to the ministry that technology sits at the centre of the lives of young people all over the world (Aydin and Tasci 2005:251). We are seeing a steady change of trends in which communication amongst most young people is largely through social media. The church has no option other than making social media a part of it. In most African congregations, evangelisation has been effective through the use of social media platforms (Debergue and Harrison 2015:32). This is not only true for Africa but also in Western societies, with the difference being the number of old people using social media platforms (Cartledge and Davies 2013:42). Social media has also been a tool for mission work in the African church (Aydin and Tasci 2005:249). This has been made possible thanks to the young population who are actively technology oriented. The greatest challenge to this is that there is a danger of deviating from the primary purpose of biblical teachings to a protracted view of postmodernism that seeks to serve cultural contexts amongst young people (Sanneh 2009:112). For instance, social media has made it possible for youth ministries to share ideas with their counterparts across different cultural contexts. With Western societies setting pace for the rest of the world, there is a cultural influence amongst young people in Africa according to which behaving in a Western way is considered superior to African culture (Burgess 2011:436).

Modern Christianity is faced with divergent theological views, with both liberals and conservatives operating from extreme ends (Adogame 2013:54). While the Western Christian church has undergone almost a uniform transformation, based on societal and governmental views of human rights, into accepting liberal theological teachings such as same-sex marriage, the

African church is largely opposed to such views and its old population seems determined to keep it that way (Fatokun 2005:362). However, even though unmentioned, there is a silent war waged against the youth and children in the African church to look in a different direction from their elders. The masterminds behind liberal theology have assessed and established that the youth and children are the link to the future of the African church. While a just assessment of any theological view entails that one ought not to take sides, it is important that we examine every dogma under the lens of biblical ethics. As an African church our religious understanding and practice of Christianity should be Bible-based, Christ-centred, and Spirit-led. How then are we to teach our youth and children about the true teachings of Christ as revealed to us in the Bible? It is with this question that I look into answering the key research gap addressed by this paper. This study sees a need to transform African theology to encompass the role of children and youth while considering biblical ethics.

The Need for Apologetics and Youth Ministry in the African Church

In his book *Reasonable Faith*, the famous American religious philosopher William Lane Craig states that it is no longer enough to just teach our children Bible verses, they need apologetics (2008:6). Many scholars who have studied young populations in most geographical settings have approached their studies on the basis of anthropology and sociology (Archer 2022:16; Saarela and Finnäs 2009:46). While in the religious sector many studies have explored youth and children, this has only been so within the context of culture and not necessarily as a theological reflection (Sanneh 2009). Traditionally, there has not been a distinctive role for the youth and children in the African church (Gathogo 2022:31). However, due to religious education in most African schools, the youth have found a way to be part of the African Christian ministry (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020:11). With the advent of technological advancement and industrialisation, scholars in the global north began to discuss a need for a theological transformation to address the concerns of the young population in the Christian church (Henry 2005:132). This led to the formation of organisations within religious bodies that could be used to advocate for the needs of the youth.

African theologians have pondered the issue of children and youth within the African church and have come out with different suggestions (Sundkler and Steed 2000:72). One of the solutions proposed concerns the need to establish youth ministry as a valid vocation through the office of youth pastor within the African church (Adogame 2010:17). There is also need for extensive mentorship of the young in church to prepare them for the bigger role of leadership. This has been made possible through the establishment of youth churches within institutions of higher learning, in which the youth are responsible for their spiritual growth (Chiroma 2019). Much has been done to include young people in African Christian ministry, but there is still lacking in literature answers to questions that are facing the modern youth in the African church (Hockridge 2011:32).

While traditional, divinely revealed theology is still largely the basis of Christianity in Africa, within the cultural category of contemporary youth, questions of faith touch on the areas of the existence of God, the problem of evil and suffering, and how to harmonise faith with reason (van Klinken 2017:38). In Western theological teachings, this manner of inquiry has led to a new theological dispensation called apologetics (Okesson 2020:17). Dependent on the questions it seeks to answer, an approach from an apologetic perspective is envisaged as an intellectual enterprise which most young people in contemporary African society are finding appealing since it provides an explanation for their faith (Alanezi and Sherkat 2008:856). This is because, as demonstrated earlier, the advancement of technology and science has introduced a need for empiricism in the pursuit of understanding changes in worldviews in regard to the existing body of knowledge (Volf 2013:46). All over the world, young people are asking existential questions that are approached historically and philosophically. While this has been adapted largely by Western Christianity, it is still yet to pick up pace in African theology (Ndereba 2022:9). However, this does not mean that similar problems are not encountered within the African church.

In Africa, the young in our churches have questions to ponder likewise. Amongst the most often expressed thoughts in Christian teaching that concern the youth is the question of the relationship between African culture and Christianity (Frescura 2015:77). There is also an attempt to understand how Christianity addresses the problem of historical injustice due to colonialism,

among other things like sexual identities and types of marriage (Sanneh 2009:32). It is common to hear of these questions among the youth in Africa and this has prodded religious minds to think of the possible ways to satisfactorily answer the questions. Unlike previous generations, research conducted has shown that the current African youth are learning more from their age mates than they are learning from the elderly in their societies (Gathogo 2022:17). This has been a major shift due to technology, in which there is an opportunity to communicate with and even belong to peer groups of people outside your geographical locality. Hence, it has been quick and easy to share ideas and have experience of life outside one's own cultural setting. While this encourages growth in other aspects of human life, socially it leads to fragmented cultural identities and conflicted worldview claims (Adogame 2013:22). To help African youth and children, African Christian ministry ought to guide them from a pluralist view to a more engaged and Bible-based faith that will be beneficial for the development of Christianity and posterity in the African church.

It should be noted that the typical African Christian youth encounters issues that need an apologetic response (Frescura 2015:81). To begin with, there is religious hostility from rival religions like Islam, especially in urban centres that are becoming multicultural (Smits, Ruiter, and van Tubergen 2010:251). In such instances, there is need for the youth to be prepared with ways to respond and defend their faith in Christianity if faced with opposing claims from other religions. Secondly, there is the issue of African cultural practices that are a part of African life. Some of these practices and traditions are even preserved and supported by government agencies and if not addressed by the African church can be detrimental to the faith of Christian youth (Okesson 2020:36). Thirdly, there is a humanist campaign of gender activism which has termed much biblical teaching as patriarchal and hence as diminishing the role of women in society (Medica 2019:16). This is patently clear in some theological teachings where as a principle women cannot take pastoral roles. In light of this teaching, African Christian youth need to be guided on proper biblical ethics that will be the basis of their life and that can quench their curiosity. Lastly, there is the issue of moral relativism which has been largely an influence from Western societies (van Klinken 2017:41). In this sense, everybody seems to follow their own set of moral guidelines and morality is therefore seen to lack objectivity. Such claims if left unchecked can destroy the

foundation of Christian faith amongst youth and children. Such issues are some of the things battling youth in the African church, which an apologetic approach to theological teachings can adequately address.

Practical Ways to Engage Children and the Youth in the African Church

In this section, this paper examines the current leadership of African Christian ministry to determine whether the youth and children are effectively engaged in church affairs. I further investigate the role they play within religious settings and suggest possible ways to engage them in the African church. In most African churches, the role of the youth and children is limited to the control they have over spiritual responsibility (Fatokun 2005:359). Leadership is not easily given to the youth and this explains why there is less motivation for the current generation of youth in Africa to take pastoral roles and high positions within the leadership structure of the African church (Muller 2014:6). To enhance the participation of the youth there is a need to restructure and plan for youth-friendly programmes that will involve and encourage the participation of the youth in church activities. Research done within theology has shown that the participation of young Christians in religious activities is enhanced when there are accompanying activities done alongside preaching (Okesson 2020:42). This can only be possible if youth ministry is vibrant and the church is supportive, to accommodate their needs.

Youth-inclusive programmes provide an avenue for the participation of the youth in various church activities and ministries (Lowe and Lowe 2010:39). One of the ways to involve the young in the African church is through structured and integrated systems that have a direct link between the church's main leadership and the leadership of young people. The two should be separate but interdependent. It is worth noting that in the contemporary youth population, methods of evangelism used traditionally like direct talking and preaching to people might not work as well as evangelism through activities like sport and retreats (Frescura 2015:71). This is key to note for church leadership in Africa for the purpose of supporting and developing an adequate social structure within the church that is capable of responding to both spiritual and social needs of the youth and children. The church ought not to

focus on just the spiritual needs but also the social, political, and even economic aspects of young people's lives (Okesson 2020:19).

In Kenya, a study conducted by Ndereba (2022) found that young people are likely to attend and participate in church activities that have facilities for leisure and social interactions, rather than those that have room for only religion-related issues. This is common for big churches that have a vibrant youth ministry within the country. Outreach activities are mainly conducted by the youth and recreational activities have been a major way of increasing youth and children's participation in church (Knibbe 2011:480). Sport activities and competitive games are also a part of most Christian ministries in the current religious sphere in Kenya. It seems then that to improve the participation of young people in church activities there is a need to transform the traditional church programme that focuses solely on spiritual life and encompass an all-round approach to church activities (Frescura 2015:66). Using the young in the church to spread the gospel and engage in outreach activities can result in more young people turning out and attending church services. It is more likely for young people to attend places where there are other young people than institutions where room for young people is limited and curtailed (Bevans 2015). In this case, outreach to young people should be conducted through discipleship materials that are contextualised to fit the spiritual needs of young people.

The involvement of children in religious ministry is a big boost for the future of the African church. As much as children and the youth are mostly classified into one category, both play an important, distinct role in shaping the future of the church (Kool 2008:29). Children's educational programmes such as Sunday school are a big platform for preparing and transforming the young ones so they can assume leadership roles in the future of the church (van der Meulen 2009:171). There should be a design to aim children's religious teachings at participation and at applying the knowledge they are taught in Sunday schools and other religious programmes, rather than being just listeners. By participating, it makes them part of the church and they grow up prepared for leadership roles in the church (Bevans 2015). Additionally, creating children-friendly programmes can not only improve the participation of children but can also incorporate parents and guardians into these activities as a support to their young ones.

The most identified problem facing young people in Africa has been understanding the biblical text in the context of interpretations being offered by religious teachers (Jensz 2012:244). There is a lack of adequate teaching about the right Christian doctrine and the correct interpretations of the Bible which engage youth issues (Peskett and Ramachandra 2003:21). Most of the youth are often faced with difficulties in reading and understanding the Bible and its intended purpose (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:107). This is because the Bible as a message of God requires a divine revelation to understand, and this needs a spiritual guide. By introducing centres for biblical teaching and personnel available to engage the youth in Bible studies, the youth will be equipped with knowledge to differentiate between false and true teachings (Knibbe 2011:486). As a means of religious freedom in most African countries, there is currently an increasing number of churches with unregulated Christian teachings that can prey on the young people in the society if left unchecked (Ndereba 2022:9). Every responsible Christian ministry in Africa should offer guidance through proper teachings to their young people in the church for mentorship and to promote religious participation.

Key issues have been raised by youth concerning biblical teachings, which definitely need a response and guidance from experienced theologians (Sundkler and Steed 2000:53). In most of their lives, the youth in Africa are exposed to different worldviews from different religions, communities, and even political dispensations (Wijzen 2009:147). Most of the false teachers are using texts in the Bible that appear controversial to woo these young people into their side of belief. In a study conducted in Kenya, most of the youth were found to ask questions about whether religion was used as a tool to oppress Africans in colonial times (Ndereba 2022:14). It further found out that there are open debates in Kenyan urban centres where these themes are discussed which are often frequented by the youth. In these meetings there are no established, qualified religious leaders who are accredited to teach religion. This poses a danger to the spiritual lives of the young people since it can lead to apostasy on the basis of misinformation. Another aspect is the convergence of religion and science which needs a clear elaboration for young people to understand the importance of each of these disciplines (Zurlo, Johnson, and Crossing 2020:77). There should be a Christian response to the issues in science like Darwinism which opposes the creation teachings of Christianity. A proper grasp of the teachings of God and biblical ethics will help improve the

participation of children and youth in the African church and also transform African Christian theology.

Conclusion

For a long time, African theologians have battled with the problem of the interference of Western culture in the African traditional view of life. This is evidenced in many aspects of life across religious, socioeconomic, and political areas in the continent of Africa. In religion, the African youth have been at the centre of confusion, being faced with a dilemma between the appealing Western culture and the socially strict African religious environment. Interestingly, most of the African religious leaders who have tried to reconcile such differences have only done so by focusing on the religious life of the youth. This method has been seen not to work since most of the youth have encounters outside church that predispose them to different worldviews. Before offering to teach the right doctrine to the youth there must be ways to include them and encourage them to participate in church activities. Participation then marks the beginning of transforming the ministry through care and responding to the spiritual needs of the young people. In most cases, emotional problems coupled with suffering and evil are the cause of religious misunderstanding in many of the African youth. These problems need spiritual care and guidance from church leadership.

This paper argues that youth and children play an important role in the African church and their participation in religious activities should be encouraged. This has been supported by statistics showing that a large part of the population of the continent of Africa is comprised of young people. Engaging in the participation of the youth and children in church activities means exploring a golden opportunity of spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and bridging the gap between Christianity and other conflicting worldviews. This paper has also demonstrated that the current structure of leadership and service programmes in African Christian ministry is not preparing the young people for leadership roles. This has been challenged, and suggestions offered to cause a change of status and increase the preservation of correct Christian teachings and biblical ethics in the African church. From the observations in this paper, it is clear that the participation of children and the youth in church is essential

for the transformation of the African church. Specific themes emerging from this paper can be engaged further by future research.

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