

African Theological Journal for Church and Society



ISSN 2708-7565

Issue 6:2, November 2025

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In this issue

Re-Reading Matthew 1:3–6 in the Light of the Inclusion of Four Non-Israelite Women in Jesus' Genealogy by Motuma B. Amante p. 1

This article delves into the inclusion of four non-Israelite women in Jesus' genealogy as detailed in Matthew 1:3–6, challenging traditional interpretations that often label these women as notorious sinners. The paper reexamines their roles, arguing that their inclusion underscores their resilience, empowerment, and significant contributions, thereby challenging patriarchal norms.

Caesarea Philippi and Mark 8:27–35 as a Turning Point in the Discovery and Revelation of the Identity of Jesus Christ: Historical Linguistics Analysis by Paul Anyidoho & Randa El Chami p. 28

The focus of the Gospel of Mark is the unveiling of the identity of Jesus Christ through reported events, space, people, and discourses which allow readers to discover his comprehensive identity. Mark 8:27–35 exemplifies this unveiling. The question that guides this study is the following: why is the revelation of Jesus as Christ in the Gospel of Mark situated in his journey towards the landscape of Caesarea Philippi rather than anywhere else?

Samaritan Compassion (Luke 10:25–37) and African Socioeconomic Problems by Abel A Alamu..... p. 56

The worsening conditions of many African states have caught global attention for a very long time with no end in sight. This paper presents the argument that imbibing the Samaritan's compassion can significantly address Africa's socioeconomic problems. Avoiding the pitfalls of the robbers, the priest, and the Levite, through a lifestyle of love and compassion in policies and programmes, will help mitigate African socioeconomic issues.

ATJCS is published by the Network for African Congregational Theology in conjunction with the Christian Literature Fund and Huguenote College.

John Calvin’s Biblicism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: a Constructive Retrieval for Theology, Ministry, and Social Witness by Charles Nana K. Twumasi-Ankrah p. 80

This article examines John Calvin’s approach to the concept of the Trinity (that God is three-in-one) while emphasising his insistence on a biblically grounded Trinitarian theology that resists speculation. The article will then argue that retrieving John Calvin’s biblical Trinitarianism can furnish contemporary theologians with a constructive way forward for navigating the present malady of fragmentation between exegesis, doctrine, and public witness.

An African Christian Reflection on the Metaphorisation of the Church as Body by Isaac Boaheng p. 101

A proper understanding of New Testament ecclesiological metaphors is required to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. Yet not much theological attention is given to these metaphors in contemporary African theological discourses. This research was, therefore, conducted to examine the body metaphor from an African socio-cultural and religious perspective to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the Christian church.

Biblical Ethics, Children, and Youth in the African Church: Towards Transforming African Theology and the Role of Youth and Children in the Church by Richard Ondicho Otiso p. 121

This paper evaluates biblical ethics and compares it with various approaches adopted from the perspective of the global south to understand Christian faith. It argues 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.

Reimagining Bible Study as a Tool for Community Transformation in Informal Settlements by Otieno Oguok p. 141

The 2004 Pattaya Lausanne Consultation on World Evangelisation registered a concern regarding the need “for the Church to be more effective in pursuing the mission of God in large cities.” This article, following this concern, attempts to locate and promote Bible study groups as potential hubs for preparing the church in the slums and informal settlements to respond to the socio-political and economic challenges these settlements experience.

Church Leadership Capacity-building for Rural Community Development: Reflections from the AOG in Zimbabwe by Kimion Tagwirei..... p. 166

The church has been lauded as an able vehicle for community development and inclusive transformation in and beyond Africa. In attending to the need for integral mission, challenges remain in rural congregations and communities that are still hard-pressed by a series of crises. This paper identifies rural Zimbabwe’s community needs and suggests pastoral capacity building strategies to enhance desired development.

The Responses of the Christian Church to Pandemics in Nigeria: a Historical Comparison of the 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 Pandemics by Oluwasegun Peter Aluko p. 190

The Christian church in Nigeria has responded to pandemics in a variety of ways over the years, especially during the COVID-19 and 1918 influenza pandemics. The theological, institutional, and social aspects of Christian responses to pandemics in Nigeria are examined in this historical analysis, which draws attention to significant changes, such as the 1918 pandemic’s shift from faith-healing techniques and spiritual rebirth to COVID-19’s technological adaption, humanitarian efforts, and public health initiatives.

Challenges and Solutions in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems in Africa Inland Church: Nakuru Town Region by Awino Luke Odhiambo..... p. 214

This research intended to discover the challenges confronted in the administration of human resource control systems in the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Kenya. The objective was to identify the control systems, evaluate the challenges that are prevalent to the administration, and to propose solutions to such challenges. The study found several challenges in the development and administration of human resource management control systems, and makes a number of recommendations to meet these challenges.

Review of Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove? (Dogara I Manomi) in: *Going the Extra Mile: Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler*, M.R. Gunda, K. Gies, E.Chitando, J. Hock and L. Janneck (eds.) by Melesse K. Woldetsadik..... p. 242

Review of *Identity Formation and the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading* (Tekalign Duguma Negewo) by Abyot S. Gashute p. 246

Review of *Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews* (eds. Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Linder P. Saunders) by Benjamin Isola Akano..... p. 249

Review of *Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of 1 Peter* (eds. Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Jessica A. Udall) by Marissa September..... p. 253

Review of *Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States* (Mahari Tedla Korcho) by Susan Kemigisha p. 257

Review of *Critical Issues in Contemporary Church* (Samuel Tengey) by Seyram B. Amenyedzi p. 260

Review of *Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth* (Samuel Tengey) by Seyram B. Amenyedzi..... p. 263

Amante, MB 2025, 'Re-Reading Matthew 1:3–6 in the Light of the Inclusion of Four Non-Israelite Women in Jesus' Genealogy', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 1-27

Re-Reading Matthew 1:3–6 in the Light of the Inclusion of Four Non-Israelite Women in Jesus' Genealogy

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Abstract

This article delves into the inclusion of four non-Israelite women in Jesus' genealogy as detailed in Matthew 1:3–6, challenging traditional interpretations that often label these women as notorious sinners. Through a historical-critical and intertextual analysis, the paper reexamines their roles, arguing that their inclusion underscores their resilience, empowerment, and significant contributions, thereby challenging patriarchal norms and offering a broader human experience. The study posits that these women, often viewed through sinfulness or gentile identity, should be recognised for their heroic deeds and profound faith. This reinterpretation reframes their inclusion as a testament to God's divine plan, where individuals, irrespective of their past or nationality, are integral to salvation history. The paper further discusses the contemporary implications of this reinterpretation, emphasising themes of gender equality, cultural inclusivity, and a nuanced understanding of redemption. By highlighting these women's stories, the study advocates societal and theological recognition of women's contributions and potential, encouraging efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes and promote inclusivity. Ultimately, this exploration provides a richer understanding of the genealogy, celebrating diversity within biblical narratives and inspiring a re-evaluation of women's roles, both historically and in modern contexts.

Introduction

The inclusion of four non-Israelite women in Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:3–6 has intrigued scholars for centuries, highlighting their complex roles in biblical history. Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba are celebrated for their resilience and faith, challenging traditional portrayals and emphasising their agency in a patriarchal society. Their presence encourages a re-evaluation of themes like redemption and divine purpose, urging recognition of gender equality and cultural inclusivity in biblical and modern contexts. This study calls for reassessing narratives steeped in patriarchal bias, advocating a more inclusive view of women's contributions. By examining these women's stories, the article inspires a dialogue on the importance of gender equality and the role of women in shaping both sacred and secular realms. It emphasises the need for reinterpretation and to demonstrate the heroic deeds and profound faith of the women to foster a more equitable society globally and in specific regions like South Africa and Ethiopia. Therefore, this article sets the stage for a re-reading of Matthew 1:3–6 that acknowledges the theological significance of including these remarkable women within the lineage of Jesus Christ. By emphasising their critical roles, we can appreciate how these figures not only contributed to the unfolding of salvation history but also serve as symbols of welcome and inclusion for all, thus enriching contemporary discussions on diversity and gender in the context of faith.

Traditional Interpretation of the Four Women in Matthew 1:3–6

Let's begin with the intriguing reasons behind the inclusion of these four women in Jesus' genealogy. The four non-Israelite women play a significant role in Matthew's gospel, intentionally included by the author despite the custom of androcentric genealogies in the ancient Near East (Hill 1972:74). However, it is worth noting that this inclusion of women in a patriarchal lineage poses problems for some biblical scholars (Jones 1994:258).

Some argue that the four women are included in Jesus' genealogy because they were considered notorious sinners. This traditional interpretation suggests that these women engaged in sinful acts and immorality, making them well-known for their notorious behaviour. These scholars suggest that

the purpose of including them in Jesus' genealogy is as a reminder of the sinful nature of humanity and the need for redemption (Boice 2001:15; Brown 1993:71–74; Gibbs 2006:87; Hagner 1993:10; Keener 1999:79; Luz 2007:83; Weren 1997:288). However, Jerome, in the fourth century, claimed that men are the 'least holy', compared to women, in Jesus' genealogy (Bruner 2004:10). The women are thus not the only sinners in Jesus' genealogy.

Another interpretation posits that these women were gentiles included in Jesus' genealogy. Based on this view, the four women should primarily be known as gentiles rather than as possible sinners. Contemporary scholars like Morris (1992:23) and Johnson (1988:152) also say that the four women are gentiles. Furthermore, Heil (1991:541) notes that their inclusion is not due to their sinfulness, as there is no evidence in the biblical tradition that Rahab and Ruth were sinful. On his side, Keener (1997:54) emphasises the purpose of 'missions and racial reconciliation', focusing on the inclusion of gentile women in Jesus' genealogy.

Additionally, Tamar and Bathsheba can be seen as women who acted out of desperation and in difficult circumstances, but their stories also highlight their perseverance and determination to seek justice. Tamar, who disguised herself as a prostitute to trick Judah into fulfilling his familial duty, boldly fought for what was rightfully hers (Genesis 38:12–26). Bathsheba, on the other hand, endured the loss of her husband and the disgraceful actions of King David, but she eventually became the mother of Solomon, who succeeded David as king (2 Samuel 11–12). Nonetheless, the sovereign plan and purpose of God works through the most unexpected women who are receptive to God's will and the unexpected workings of divine providence (Hagner 1993:10; Hanson 1978:53; Johnson 1988:157; Luz 2007:84). Freed (1987:3) notes that the inclusion of the women is to 'counter the Jewish accusation that Jesus was the illegitimate son of Mary' in such a way that it demonstrates that God works in unexpected ways to fulfil his will.

Lastly, another interpretation argues that the inclusion of these women prefigures God's work in an unexpected way to achieve divine purposes. This interpretation sees the four women as agents of God, carrying out God's will to advance his plan of salvation. References to divine will could be drawn from theological texts or biblical passages that depict God's use of such people in

punishing sinners or bringing about justice (Boice 2001:15; Brown 1993:71-74; Gibbs 2006:87; Hagner 1993:10; Keener 1999:79; Luz 2007:83; Weren 1997:288). Boice (2001:15) adds that Jesus' ancestry provides a clue, showing that God chooses servants from a wide spectrum. However, none of the above interpretations are persuasive. Let's see another alternative, as follows.

Re-examining the Traditional Interpretation of the Four Women (Matthew 1:3–6)

Alternative Interpretation

The traditional interpretation of the four women in Jesus' genealogy suggests they are included due to their involvement in significant acts of God towards the salvation of humankind or as symbolic figures (Brown 1993:71–72; Bruner 1987:7–8; Hagner 1993:10; Heffern 1912:77–78; Johnson 1988:154; Luz 2007:83–84; Smith 1989:32). However, an alternative viewpoint emphasises their roles as heroines of faith and courage, challenging the norms of their time. This perspective argues that their inclusion was not simply to highlight notorious acts or gentile status, but to celebrate their resilience and faith, as evidenced in the historical account of Matthew 1. In a patriarchal society, featuring women in a genealogy was unconventional, suggesting Matthew aimed to underline their importance in salvation history.

This alternative interpretation offers a richer understanding, shifting focus from literal actions to broader themes of redemption and breaking societal norms. By looking at these women's stories beyond traditional incidents, we appreciate their contributions to the human story. They were not just participants in historical events but complex individuals overcoming challenges, highlighting the significance of women in salvation history. Their inclusion in the genealogy underscores that God's purpose involves individuals irrespective of societal expectations or past actions.

Additionally, the inclusion of these women serves as a profound testament to God's inclusive nature, showing his work through diverse individuals. Whether due to their pasts or as representatives of a broader community, their stories illustrate faith, courage, and perseverance. This narrative encourages the belief that God can use anyone, regardless of background, to fulfil his redemptive plans. Their presence in the genealogy reflects God's ability to

transform lives and use a variety of experiences to accomplish divine purposes. Consequently, before Johnson, scholars such as Robinson (1951) and Milton (1962) supported Heffern's view that God's salvation plan included Gentiles from the beginning of salvation history (Heffern 1912). Johnson (1988:154–155) also supported Heffern and his proponents. According to these scholars, Matthew mentions the four women to show God's salvation plan for the gentiles from the beginning. David C. Sim (1995:22), however, suggests that the author of the Gospel of Matthew's inclusion of the four women was not because they were non-Jews, saying that

it is not [...] certain that the four women were Gentiles or were thought to be Gentiles in the time of the Evangelist.

It is, for example, uncertain if Tamar was a gentile, even though many scholars contend she was a Canaanite (Harrington 1991:32; Sim 1995:22). It is, however, clear that she was considered a gentile in later Jewish tradition (Brown 1993:73; Johnson 1988:270–272; Philo 1996:221; Sim 1995:22). It is difficult to conclude if Tamar was a gentile or not since later Judaism considers Tamar and other women proselytes (Sim 1995:22). According to Sim (1995:22), the four women were gentiles who were converted to Judaism. Conversely, before this view, Martin Luther held the view that the four women were included because the Messiah had gentiles among his ancestors. But, as discussed, there are objections to this view because the women were converted to the Jewish religion (Freed 1987:4, 7). Thus, it is not clear if the four women were specifically included in the genealogy of Jesus because they were gentile women. Keener (2009:79) notes that 'Not all commentators regard these women as representative Gentiles'.

In conclusion, this study argues that traditional interpretations do not fully explain the inclusion of these women in Jesus' genealogy. Instead, their heroic deeds and profound faith are central to understanding their role in God's plan (see Weren 1997:305). By revisiting historical contexts and shedding light on their personal stories, this interpretation offers a renewed appreciation of their significance. Through this lens, the motivations and lives of these remarkable women are explored, affirming their lasting impact on Jesus' lineage and emphasising the value of diverse experiences in the unfolding of salvation history.

Jesus' Genealogy Breaks Boundaries through the Four Women

The genealogy of Jesus in Matthew shows a diverse range of ancestors, breaking down traditional boundaries between Israelites and non-Israelites. This lineage reveals a mixture of backgrounds, including individuals from different cultures and nations. By including non-Israelites in his lineage, Jesus' genealogy emphasises the universal nature of his message and mission. It underscores the idea that all people, regardless of their background, are valued and part of God's plan. This representation of diversity in Jesus' genealogy serves as a powerful reminder that God's love extends to all, transcending any boundaries or divisions that may exist among different groups of people. These women, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, were not only non-Israelites but also had controversial backgrounds.

Tamar

Tamar is the first woman mentioned in the list of ancestors in Matthew 1. Besides Genesis 38, Tamar is also mentioned in Jubilee 41:1–2 and in the Testament of Judah 10:1–2. Genesis 38 tells the story of Judah, who left his father's house and went down from his brothers to Adullam to marry an Adullamite (Genesis 38:1, 12, 20). He met a Canaanite girl from the Adullamites whose name was Shua (Genesis 38:2) and married her. She gave birth to his children. Then Judah took Tamar for his son Er (Genesis 38:6). Tamar was a non-Israelite woman. Tamar became an ancestor of Judah and David through Perez (Matthew 1:3). Tamar was loyal to Judah's family and was an ancestor of King David. Consequently, Tamar was probably included in the Matthean genealogy because of her faith in God amid the non-Jews, as a representative, to be a blessing in the house of Perez (Ruth 4:12). The story of Ruth is like that of Tamar (Freed 1987:4, 7). Moreover, Ruth 4:12 connects Ruth with Tamar in the genealogy (Weren 1997:297). This issue is clarified by Fisch (1982:427):

Lot is the father of Moab and thus the ancestor of Ruth, while Judah is the father of Perez and thus the ancestor of Boaz. Another way of putting it would be to say that we have here the story of a single clan (that of Abraham and his nephew

Lot) which separates (Gen. xiii 11) at an early stage and is then reunited in the persons of Ruth and Boaz.

The story in Matthew is linked to Tamar's story in Genesis 38 but this story also reappears in Ruth, which interconnects the lineage of Perez, Tamar's son, to include Boaz's role in the same ancestral line (Ruth 4:11–12). In these verses, the Old Testament links Tamar with Ruth, the Moabite woman. Perez is the offspring of Judah. Consequently, Ruth, who was from Moab, became the ancestress of King David, like Tamar. The Book of Ruth ends with the ancestor Perez, Tamar's son, and his offspring, whose generations further include Ruth, Boaz's son Obed, and David.

Most scholars argue that Tamar is a Canaanite woman or from Palestinian Syria (Brown 1993:72; Davies and Allison 2004:5; Hakh 2014:112–113; Keener 1997:54; Konradt 2020:30; Weren 1997:296). However, according to early Jewish tradition, Tamar is 'a daughter of Aram', for example in Jubilee 41:1 and the Testament of Judah 10:1 (Bauckham 1995:314, 317; Johnson 1988:159; Konradt 2014:268–269). In these writings, Tamar is named as the daughter of Abraham's brother Aram (Bauckham 1995:316). She is also mentioned in b. Sotah10b, Targum Pseudo Jonathan, Genesis 38, and Genesis Rabbah 85:10, where she is regarded as a daughter of Aram (Freed 1987:11; Johnson 1988:159, 270). As argued above, I think that Tamar was from Palestinian Syria and thus a Canaanite woman.

Besides the Gospel of Matthew, other early Jewish writers, including Philo, also discuss Tamar in a positive light. Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher from Alexandria in the first century AD, wrote extensively on various topics, including ethics and virtues. In his work titled *Virtues*, Philo mentions Tamar favourably (Philo 1996:221). Philo may have admired Tamar's resourcefulness, bravery, and dedication in fulfilling her duty. He likely appreciated her ability to navigate challenging circumstances and ensure her place in the ancestral lineage of Jesus. Overall, the Gospel of Matthew acknowledges Tamar's significance in Jesus' lineage, while other early writers like Philo also recognise her value and highlight her virtuous qualities. Bauckham (1995:314) observes that nothing is said about the ancestry of Tamar by Philo; neither does Genesis 38 present Tamar's ancestry, but it simply assumes that she belonged to the people of Canaan. He argues further that 'Tamar is not said to be of Canaanite

origin, she was not' (Bauckham 1995:314). Bauckham (1995:319) shows that Tamar came not from Canaan but from elsewhere (Genesis 38:11). Based on the explanation of tradition, Tamar was not a Canaanite (Heil 1991:539) and not even an Aramean (Bauckham 1995:314, 317).

However, the opinion of Bauckham (1995:319), which is that Tamar is not from Canaan, is not accepted by many scholars, for they believe that she was from Canaan as discussed above. Furthermore, Bauckham deduces that this tradition makes Tamar the only worshipper of the true God, apart from the family of Abraham. Yet, Tamar was punished for prostitution because she was a priest's daughter. Nonetheless, it is difficult to say it is a plausible reason for Tamar's inclusion in the Matthean genealogy (Bauckham 1995:319).

So, scholars are divided into two groups, arguing whether Tamar was from Canaan or from Palestinian Syria/Aram and whether she was a gentile or not. Even though scholars do not agree on this, it is crucial to investigate why Tamar is included in the Matthean genealogy. Bauckham (1995:318) argues that the reason she was included in the genealogy of Jesus was not because she was a non-Jew but because she was a converted proselyte through intermarriage, which may not be convincing due to the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38.

As opposed to this, later Jewish traditions and the majority of scholars support the view that Tamar was a Canaanite and that the four women were non-Jews as discussed earlier (for example, Brown 1993:72; Bruner 1987:7; Davies and Allison 2004:5; France 2007:36–37; Hagner 1993:10; Hanson 1978:53; Johnson 1988:167–170; Keener 1997:54, 2009:79; Konradt 2020:30; Magezi 2020:3–5; Smith 1989:32; Talbert 2010:32; Turner 2006:27). Other scholars, such as Lenski (1964), Morris (1992), Hendriksen (1973), Patte (1987), Howell (1990), Kynes (1991), Carter (1996, 2000), and Evans (2012), are silent about whether Tamar is a Canaanite/gentile or not. Most scholars do not comment on whether Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah were non-Jews or not. However, Bauckham (1995:318) states that they were non-Jews. Though the Testament of Judah 10 and Jubilee 41:1–7 say that Tamar was Jewish, Genesis 38 does not give evidence for this (Konradt 2020:30; Talbert 2010:32). It is not plausible to argue that Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah were also non-Jews to convince that Tamar was a non-Jew.

Bauckham's view is not credible because Tamar was included in the Matthean genealogy. However, Negewo (2021:108) suggests that Tamar was a Canaanite woman who was the daughter of Melchizedek, who worshipped God without being the family of Abraham. Negewo points out,

The author of the Gospel of Matthew probably included Tamar's name in his genealogical account in line with this Jewish tradition, which did not necessarily link the identity of God's people to the Abrahamic line as its background. (2021:108)

As discussed above, Abraham is considered the father of the nations (Genesis 17:6; Matthew 3:9, 8:11–12; Talbert 2010:31) who constitutes Jews' and non-Jews' genealogies as a common starting point, connecting the ancestors.

In summary, Tamar was probably included in the Matthean genealogy because of her faith in God amid the non-Jews, as a representative, to be a blessing in the house of Perez (Ruth 4:12). The story of Ruth is like that of Tamar. The author of Matthew's gospel, therefore, establishes that, if Tamar was a true God-worshipper, God's salvation plan for all nations was long prepared. In later Judaism, it is said that the women were led by the Holy Spirit to be included in the genealogy of Jesus (Freed 1987:4, 7). Thus, Genesis 38 does not suggest that Tamar's act of deception to have relations with her father-in-law caused God to overlook her inclusion in the redemptive lineage that leads to Jesus Christ.

Rahab

According to Matthew's gospel, Rahab was one of the women included in the genealogy of Jesus. Surprisingly, she is not mentioned in the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, or in the writings of Philo. However, Josephus (in *Antiquities* 5.8–15) mentions her in 'a favourable light as the keeper of an inn', but does not describe her as a harlot. Joshua 2:9 presents Rahab as a woman of faith. Furthermore, in the New Testament, she is mentioned in James 2:25 with Abraham as someone who is justified by her work and in Hebrews 11:31 and Matthew 1:5 as a good example of a person of faith (Talbert 2010:32). This

suggests that Rahab was a non-Jew but a woman of faith (Bruner 1987:7; Konradt 2020:30).

In Matthew 1:5, her name in Greek is given as Ραχάβ. This term creates a problem for Matthean scholars because the spelling of the name has different variants. Bauckham (1995:320) states that, in the Septuagint (the LXX), it is transliterated as 'Raab' (in Joshua 2:1, 2:3, 6:23, and 6:25) which differs from Matthew 1:5. In the New International Version she is named 'Rahab', equivalent to 'Ρααβ (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), which also differs from Ραχαβ in Matthew 1:5 (Brown 1993:60; Weren 1997:298–299). In Josephus' *Antiquities of the Jews*, "Ραχαβη" is used, which is translated as 'Rachab' in English. As Bauckham (1995:320) explains,

Since Josephus' transliterations of biblical names are often independent of and differ from the LXX, the former is more likely to be original, the latter an assimilation to the LXX and Christian usage.

Therefore, the name *Rahab* is used in this article.

In Joshua 2, the story of Rahab is recounted. Clement of Rome, a prominent early Christian leader, further elaborates and retells Rahab's story in a letter he wrote to the Corinthians. This indicates that the story of Rahab was considered important in the early Christian community, and this significance has been recognised throughout the centuries, even up to the present day. Clement of Rome's letter, known as 1 Clement, delves into the details of Rahab's story, offering a reinterpretation of the original passage in Joshua. While not included in the canonical scriptures, 1 Clement is a valuable historical document that sheds light on the beliefs and practices of early Christians. Clement of Rome's elaboration of Rahab's story in 1 Clement 12 expands upon the themes present in the biblical passage (Joshua 2:1–24). He emphasises Rahab's faith and portrays her as a righteous woman who acts by God's will. Clement suggests that Rahab's actions were motivated by her faith in the Israelite God and her recognition of his power. By assisting the spies, she aligns herself with the Israelites and, in turn, becomes part of God's chosen people.

This retelling of Rahab's story by Clement of Rome likely served several purposes. First, it reinforced the idea that God's chosen people were not limited to the Israelites alone. Rahab, a Canaanite woman, demonstrates that faith and righteousness are not bound by nationality or background. This message would have resonated with the early Christian community, which was comprised of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, Clement's interpretation of Rahab's story highlights the importance of faith and action in the lives of believers. Rahab's efforts to protect the spies and her trust in God's promise of salvation are seen as exemplary. Her story serves as an inspiration to early Christians.

Rahab is called 'πόρνῃ' meaning 'prostitute' in Hebrews 11:31. 1 Clement 12 elaborates that, while Rahab was a harlot, she had faith and practised hospitality. She was thus saved because of her faith. Clement further says, 'You see, beloved, that there was not only faith, but prophecy, in this woman' (1 Clement 12:8). While some may argue that Clement's approach could be seen as distorting the original message, it is worth considering how his elaboration sheds light on the inclusion of Rahab in the genealogy mentioned in Matthew 1. By examining the contemporaneous views expressed by Matthew, we can gain a deeper understanding of the possible significance of Rahab's presence in the lineage.

There are several questions about the inclusion of Rahab in the tribe of Judah, the ancestry of David, and the genealogy of Jesus. Did sources from the Old Testament or later Jewish traditions describe Rahab for Matthew's purpose? Did they connect Rahab to the tribe of Judah and the ancestry of David? If not, why did the author of Matthew include Rahab in the tribe of Judah, the ancestry of David, and the genealogy of Jesus? These and similar questions need answers.

Johnson (1988:162–165) points out that later rabbis suggest that (1) Rahab became the ancestress of several priestly prophets; (2) she drew near to God so that she gained acceptance before God; and (3) she was represented as a proselyte. Joshua 2 mentions that it is a sign of faith that Rahab believes in the mighty act of God – that he brought Israel from Egypt and helped them to cross the Red Sea.

Indeed, there are possible grounds for Matthew to include Rahab in the account of the tribe of Judah and the ancestry of David. Even though it is not convincing, she was considered a proselyte in the tribe of Judah (Johnson 1988:164; Weren 1997:299). Moreover, Johnson (1988:165) states,

We conclude that the compiler of the Matthean genealogy included Rahab in the ancestry of David based on an old Rabbinic tradition according to which Rahab belonged, as a proselyte, to the tribe of Judah. Whether this tradition showed Rahab as the mother of Boaz, we cannot say.

Since Matthew follows 1 Chronicles' genealogy, it indicates that she was from the tribe of Judah through Salmon, the father of Boaz (1 Chronicles 2:10–13; see also Ruth 4:18–22).

Scholars debate whether Rahab was Boaz's mother, given the two-hundred-year chronological gap between them (Bauckham 1995:321; Evans 2012:35; France 2007:36; Johnson 1988:165; Turner 2008:59–60), while Matthean scholars highlight this inconsistency (Brown 1993:60; Davies and Allison 2004:6). Bauckham (1995:322), however, argues against this, noting that Old Testament genealogies, like David's from Judah (Ruth 4:18–22; 1 Chronicles 2:1–15; see Morris 1992:24), often include too few generations. He suggests that Salma, Boaz's father, was Rahab's contemporary but admits there is no evidence in the Old Testament or Jewish literature of Rahab's marriage to Salma or her being Boaz's parent (Bauckham 1995:322, 2002:18). Rahab, therefore, is identified as a proselyte, raising questions about her inclusion in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Bauckham 1995:324).

Nevertheless, Hebrews 11:31, James 2:25, 1 Clement 12:1–8, and *Antiquities* 5.11–14 show that Rahab was a woman of faith in the God of Israel and that her faith plus her work is praised (Bauckham 1995:324; Nowel 2008:5; Smith 1989:32). Furthermore, according to Rabbinic tradition and Jewish literature, it is assumed that Rahab was married to one of the Israelites, likely Joshua, and became the mother of many prophets (Brown 1993:60, 594; Freed 1987:8; Hagner 1993:11; Hanson 1978:58), and that Salma was probably a member of the tribe of Judah (1 Chronicles 2:11; Ruth 4:20–21; Bauckham 1995:324, 2002:35; Heil 1991:541; Hendriksen 1973:116; Magezi 2020:6).

As mentioned above, later Rabbinic traditions propose two views. First, she was married to Joshua, who cannot be related to the Davidic genealogical line. Second, Rahab was married to Salma, the descendant of David (Bauckham 1995:324–329, 2002:37; Robinson 2009:258). Despite these views, Johnson notes that the later rabbis believed that Rahab drew near to God, so God drew her to himself (Johnson 1988:163; see 1 Chronicles 4:21; Robinson 2009:258). Furthermore, she is owned by the Spirit of God and considered a prophetess (Hanson 1978:58). Thus, Rahab, who was from non-Jewish descent, is included in the genealogy of Jesus ‘as ancestresses of prominent OT figures as adhering to the tribe of Judah’ (Johnson 1988:164).

As discussed above, there are different views among scholars concerning whether Rahab is part of the Abrahamic and Davidic genealogy or not. Heil (1991:540) argues that Rahab advanced Abrahamic and Davidic genealogies. Many other scholars argue that Rahab was included in the tribe of Judah through intermarriage even before the genealogy of David (Bauckham 1995:322). If this is so, the author of Matthew’s gospel mentions Rahab as the wife of Salmon/Salma and the mother of Boaz, which differs from rabbinic tradition (Hanson 1978:54).

By and large, considering the various views of scholars, this study contends that Rahab fulfilled the purpose of God before Israel invaded Canaan (Heffern 1912:72). Despite being a harlot, Rahab recognised that the God of Israel is the God of heaven and earth; hence, she gained favour before God (Joshua 2:11). Her faith in God was significant; as Josephus says, God revealed himself, saying ‘for of this (she said) she knew through certain signs which God had given her’ (*Antiquities*). Furthermore, Clement of Rome (1 Clement 12:1) says ‘For her faith and hospitality Rahab the harlot was saved’. Clement (1 Clement 12:1–8) compares her hospitality with that of Abraham (Nowell 2008:6).

The issue of the sign given to Rahab in Joshua 2:18, which shows the faith of Rahab, is also important to consider. Translations vary: the Revised Standard Version reads ‘you shall bind this scarlet cord in the window through which you let us down’; the Septuagint reads ‘you do not tie this crimson cord in the window through which you let us down’; and Masoretic Text reads ‘you will also deal kindly with my father’s house and give me a sure sign’ (verse 12, not verse 18). Some scholars note that Clement believed there is a Christological

redemption plan in the narrative (Freed 1987:14; Hanson 1978:56). He (1 Clement 12:7) clearly says

And moreover they gave her a sign, that she should hang out from her house a scarlet thread, thereby showing beforehand that through the blood of the Lord there shall be redemption unto all of them that believe and hope on God.

Clement makes it clear that not only faith but also prophecy play a role in Rahab's inclusion (1 Clement 12:8; Hanson 1978:58).

Therefore, her presence in the Matthean genealogy is based on her faith in God rather than being included in the tribe of Judah through intermarriage, as clearly shown in Joshua 2:9–11, Joshua 18, and Antiquities 5:9–13 (Freed 1987:8; Heil 1991:540). This leads us to see the universal salvation plan of God through this genealogical account as being not only related to the Abrahamic and Davidic genealogical account but as divine fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 12:3 and Genesis 17:5, which God made to Abraham as the father of many nations (Heil 1991:540). Brown (1993:592) concludes that the Canaanite Rahab is included in Jesus' genealogy to fulfil the universal promise of God to Abraham: that all the people of the earth would be blessed through Abraham. Moreover, this promise points to a divine genealogical account because Jesus is the son of God, who is anticipated in the origin of the genealogy. Genesis 1:26 and Luke 3:38 give a biological and theological salvific meaning to Jesus' genealogy.

Ruth

In the Matthean genealogy, Ruth is the third woman identified as an ancestress of Jesus. There is a close connection between Rahab and Ruth in that Rahab marries Salmon and she gives birth to Boaz, and Boaz marries Ruth and she gives birth to Obed, the father of Jesse (Magezi 2020:6). Jesse became the father of David and Jesus the son of David. It is clearly shown in the Old Testament and Jewish sources that Ruth is non-Jewish, a Moabitess (Ruth 1:4, 2:1–2; see Hakh 2014:114–5; Konradt 2020:30). Furthermore, Allison (2004:7) notes that Rabbinic tradition recognises Ruth as a proselyte, the king's mother, and the ancestress of the Messiah. Bruner (1987:5) points out that Ruth is not

questioned morally, although she is a 'descendant of the incestuous Lot (Gen 19)'. Bruner (1987:5) concludes, 'Nevertheless, this gentile became the literal great-grandmother of David and so a distant great-grandmother of our Lord'.

Ruth's background is linked to the story of a family from Bethlehem, Judah. The family included Elimelek, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Kilion. Due to famine, they moved to the land of Moab to survive. Their sons married two Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth, but Elimelek and his two sons died in Moab, and Naomi and the two Moabite women became husbandless (Ruth 1:1–5). This is according to sources telling the story of Ruth, such as the Book of Ruth and Ruth Rabbah. Morris (1992:24) comments that there is no story about Ruth in 1 Chronicles. Apart from the Book of Ruth in the Old Testament, there are no other biblical books that provide comprehensive details about the life of Ruth.

The Book of Ruth Rabbah can be viewed as interpretive; however, as it was written 600 years after the Gospel of Matthew, its historical-cultural aspect tells us the life of Ruth. It is valuable for this study as evidence of how the early church accepted Ruth. In the above quotation, it is told that Ehud said to Eglon, the king of Moab, that God will establish a son 'who will sit on the throne of God'. According to Ruth 4:18–22, this refers to the throne of David and, through him, a long-awaited Messiah to be fulfilled in Jesus. Thus, 'I will establish a son from you', promised to Eglon, probably refers to this prophecy coming true through Ruth. Hakh (2014:115) explains that

In the Rabbinic tradition, she is also mentioned as the grandmother of Eglon, the king of Moab and grandchild of Balak (b Hor 10b).

But Ruth Rabbah 2:9 does not refer to this. Rather, it states 'I will establish a son from you who will sit on the throne of God'. Based on the tradition, Ruth was probably the daughter of King Eglon.

After the famine, Naomi wanted to return to Bethlehem, Judah, alone. Her daughters-in-law accompanied her on her way (Ruth 1:6–10). Orpah said goodbye to her mother-in-law and turned back, according to the meaning of her name. There are three places where the turning back is mentioned (Ruth

1:8, 11, 12). Ruth Rabbah 2:16 discusses the concept of turning back in three different instances mentioned in the Book of Ruth. These instances correspond with the rejection of a convert. However, if the convert persists, they are eventually accepted. Rabbi Yitzhak adds that it is important to reject with a gentle approach, while acceptance should be done with strength. Despite Orpah's return, Ruth did not turn back as her sister did; instead, she insisted on staying with her mother-in-law (Ruth 1:16). In Ruth Rabbah 2:22, it is explained that,

Ruth said: 'Do not entreat me to leave you, to return from following you.' What is 'do not entreat me'? She said to her: 'Do not sin to me, do not impose your reservations upon me.' 'To leave you, to return from following you' – in any case, my intention is to convert. It is preferable through you, and not through another. When Naomi heard this, she began arranging the laws of converts for her. She said to her: 'My daughter, it is not the way of Israelite women to go to theaters and circuses of the gentiles.' [Ruth] said to her: 'Where you go, I will go.' [Naomi] said to her: 'My daughter, it is not the way of Israel to reside in a house where there is no mezuzah.' [Ruth] said to her: 'And where you lodge, I will lodge.' 'Your people is my people – these are punishments and prohibitions.' 'Your God is my God' – [these are] the rest of the mitzvot.

This is where Ehud's words to King Eglon, the king of Moab, that the prophecy is going to be fulfilled through his daughter, Ruth, come to fruition. Based on this prophecy, Ruth becomes a true God worshipper (Ruth 1:16). Her mother-in-law recommends that she wash and anoint herself, or put on perfume, and put on her garments (Ruth 3:3).

Ruth washing and anointing herself refers to her submission to God, turning away from her idol worship. However, the question is whether she began to worship God at this point or when she was married to Mahlon, the son of Elimelech (*Ruth Rabbah* 6:2). In Ruth 3:3 (NASB), Naomi also instructs Ruth, saying 'Go down to the threshing floor', which she does in 3:6–7. This phrase refers to lying down with Boaz for sexual intercourse (Ruth 3:8). The rabbis

explain that the conception or lying with Boaz is not sinful, but ‘for the sake of Heaven’. The phrase, ‘For the sake of Heaven’ probably means ‘for a divine purpose,’ that is, God’s universal redemption plan through Ruth and others (Adelman 2012:101; Fisch 1982:436).

Boaz and Ruth are remembered in the blessing of the elders of the city (Ruth 4:11). Based on the blessing, Ruth gives birth to a child and becomes the ancestress of David and Jesus (Ruth 4:13). So, Boaz married Ruth and she became his wife (Ruth 4:13; see Freed 1987:13–14). As discussed above, this is clearly shown by the term ‘redeemer’ (Ruth 4:13–15 NASB), which the New Revised Standard Version reads as ‘restorer of life’. This may point to a legal and cultural concept known as kinsman-redeemer (*go-el* in Hebrew). In the context of the story of Ruth, the redeemer is a male relative who has a legal responsibility and the right to redeem or restore property, possessions, or rights that have been lost or forfeited by family members (Ruth 4:13–15; see Freed 1987:13–14). However, Ruth’s story of redemption has a further application – to God’s mighty redemption plan as seen in the whole story of Ruth. This form of redemption applies to the category of genealogies, clearly including the four women of whom Ruth is one (Farmer 2015:262, 304; Keener 1997:54–55). This redeeming process begins with Rahab in Joshua 2 and 6: Salmon begot Boaz through Rahab; Boaz begot Obed through Ruth; and Obed became the father of Jesse; and Jesse became the father of King David (Matthew 1:5–6). Thus, in Ruth’s context, redemption and genealogy are closely related in God’s redemptive plan. Furthermore, Ruth is praised by the later, Rabbinic tradition as the ancestress of David despite her Moabite ancestry (Johnson 1988:165). On her own initiative, Ruth accepted the God of Israel and finally was redeemed by Boaz (Evans 2012:35; Hakh 2014:114). Therefore, there is a close connection between Rahab and Ruth in the chain of genealogies, above all through their faith in God (compare Joshua 2:11 with Ruth 1:16). Furthermore, Heil (1991:541) points out that ‘according to Matthew, she was the mother of Boaz, who eventually became the husband of Ruth’. Thus, Rahab was probably the mother-in-law of Ruth.

As suggested above, Matthew 1:3–6 reveals a possible connection that emerges from the intricately woven genealogy of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth. Matthew includes Rahab and Ruth in the genealogy of the Messiah (Turner 2008:60). Consequently, Ruth 4:12 shows the continuation of the Davidic line,

which began with Lot and Judah and is fulfilled by Jesus in Matthew's gospel (Heil 1991:541). Moreover, Ruth 4:12 connects Ruth with Tamar in the genealogy (Weren 1997:297). This issue is clarified by Fisch (1982:427):

Lot is the father of Moab and thus the ancestor of Ruth, whilst Judah is the father of Perez and thus the ancestor of Boaz. Another way of putting it would be to say that we have here the story of a single clan (that of Abraham and his nephew Lot) which separates (Gen. xiii 11) at an early stage and is then reunited in the persons of Ruth and Boaz.

Hakh (2014:114) mentions that Matthew includes Ruth in the family of David by presenting her as the ancestress of Jesus. Jewish tradition shows that Ruth is a 'model proselyte' (*Antiquities* 5.9.4); however, some scholars do not agree with Hakh or Jewish tradition because they believe that Ruth became the ancestress of Jesus through faith in God, even though 'No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord' (Deuteronomy 23:3 NASB; see also Johnson 1988:167). Thus, by the plan of God, Ruth became an ancestress of the Messiah.

Conversely, some scholars argue that Ruth is the model proselyte of the Old Testament according to Rabbinic tradition (Allison 2004:7; Jackson 2003:786; Konradt 2020:30; Sim 1995:22; Smit 2010:204). In contrast, the Book of Ruth in 1:22, 2:2, 2:6, 2:21, 4:5, and 4:10 mentions that Ruth is recognised as continuing to be a Moabitess and did not become a proselyte even though later Jewish traditions consider her as a proselyte (Johnson 1988:165; Negewo 2021:110). She persisted in her ethnicity and background, but she believed in God, the God of Israel. Freed (1987:8) points out that

Ruth, the great-grandmother of David, was an ancestress of the Messiah even though she was a Moabite. She was destined for that role according to God's plan.

Her faith in God led to her being the great-grandmother of David and the ancestress of Jesus, included in the genealogy of the Messiah. Ruth was destined to be part of the royal house of David through which the Messiah would come (Freed 1987:9) even though Deuteronomy 23:3–4 states that,

No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord; none of their descendants, even to the tenth generation, shall ever enter the assembly of the Lord, because they did not meet you with food and water on the way when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.

One way of understanding this prohibition is that it was meant for men and not females (Hakh 2014:115). That is why Ruth was accepted before God, to have faith in him. According to Campbell (2008:80), Ruth's acceptance before God implies a conversion of her identity from a religious perspective, as she put her faith in God, although she retained her ethnicity as a Moabitess (Ruth 1:16; see LaCocque 2004:52). Her religious identity is expressed in Ruth 1:16 as 'your people shall be my people, and your God my God' (NRSV). This identity of religion reflects God's activity that binds the relationship of human beings through the story of Ruth in this context (Campbell 1975:80). In Ruth 1:16, Ruth shows her interest in entering the community of God's people. Neil Glover (2009:302–303) notes that Ruth joined the community after her desire was fulfilled by the community (Ruth 4:13). Ananda Geyser-Fouche and Carli Fourie (2017:5) see the Book of Ruth as an inclusive text. The author of this book underscores the exclusivity of Israel after the post-exilic period and concludes that this is the book of inclusion (de Villiers and le Roux 2016:1–6; Viljoen 2006:251). These commentators argue for inclusivity and point out that the book is opposed to the community of the law, as mentioned in Deuteronomy 23:3–4 above.

To sum up, even though there are various discussions on the inclusion of Ruth in the genealogy of Matthew, it is plausible to accept that the reason for this was her faith in God. This is clearly expressed in Ruth 1:16. It can be argued that her intermarriage was the result of her faith in God. Ruth expressed her loyalty to Naomi before the intermarriage.&&&

The Wife of Uriah (Bathsheba)

In Matthew's genealogy, Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and 'the wife of Uriah' (Bathsheba) are listed as the mother of King David's son. Bathsheba, daughter

of Eliam and wife of Uriah, is not named directly but referred to as ‘the wife of Uriah’ (Matthew 1:6). This has puzzled many scholars. Hagner (1993:10–11) suggests Bathsheba’s name is deliberately avoided, while Luz (1995:26) argues she is identified this way because she became a non-Israelite through marriage to Uriah, the Hittite, highlighting genealogical diversity. Davies and Allison (2004:174) suggest this emphasises the gentiles present in Jesus’ lineage. Heil (1991:541) argues it underscores David’s sinfulness and the murder of Uriah, a view Brown (1993) finds inadequate because it overlooks Matthew’s genealogical focus.

Bowen (2001:592) notes Bathsheba’s significant role as the queen mother of King Solomon, indicating her influence during the monarchic period. Nowell (2008:7) emphasises her foundational status in the lineage of kings’ mothers. The scholarly debate on Bathsheba’s ethnicity remains unresolved, with some asserting she was an Israelite while others contend she was non-Jewish due to her marriage to Uriah. Keener (1997:54–45, 2009:79) and Allison (2004:5) support the view of Bathsheba as a gentile through her marriage.

Bathsheba’s narrative is complex, beginning with her encounter with David under troubling circumstances (2 Samuel 11:1–4). Despite the controversial elements of her story, the focus here is not on why she is unnamed but why her inclusion as ‘the wife of Uriah’ is critical in Jesus’ genealogy. This highlights the inclusion of gentiles and complex histories within the lineage of Jesus, adding to the rich tapestry of his ancestral story.

Scholars provide different reasons why she is included in Jesus’ genealogy. For example, Doane (2019:100) notes that

Two very contrasting images of David’s masculinity are put forth in the biblical narratives about him. Matthew’s genealogy points to his failings. The text could have said that David begat Salomon, or that David begat Salomon with Bathsheba, but Matthew 1:6 specifies that ‘David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah.’ This occurs in the narrative even though Bathsheba was likely David’s lawful wife at the time Salomon was conceived. The wording of the genealogy alludes to David at his worst moment.

According to France (2007:37), Bathsheba was included in the genealogy because ‘the four “foreign” women prepare the reader for the coming of non-Israelites to follow Israel’s Messiah’. Likewise, Turner (2008:60) notes that Bathsheba is included in the genealogy of Jesus because she was a non-Jew. Considering the Gospel of Matthew’s intention, this shows divine intervention in Jesus’ genealogy through these women (Brown 1993:74). Bauckham (2002:22–23) argues that the inclusion of Bathsheba in the genealogy of Jesus is because she was a gentile. However, Brown (1993:73–74) points out that

In post-biblical Jewish piety these extraordinary unions and initiatives were seen as the work of the Holy Spirit. These women were held up as examples of how God uses the unexpected to triumph over human obstacles and intervenes on behalf of His planned Messiah.

As discussed above, these different views of the Gospel of Matthew create a quandary. On the one hand, some scholars say the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba) was an Israelite. On the other hand, others say the wife of Uriah was a gentile. From these arguments we recognise that it is difficult to conclude why Bathsheba is included in the genealogy of Jesus. It appears that Matthew purposely included the wife of Uriah in the genealogy of Jesus either (1) because Uriah was a gentile and Bathsheba needs to be seen as having a non-Jewish background to show God’s universal plan of salvation for the whole world or (2) to indicate the divine intervention of God in Jesus’ genealogy through the wife of Uriah. Nonetheless, the wife of Uriah was intentionally included in the genealogy of Jesus to show God’s divine intervention for the salvation of the world in God’s universal plan through the genealogical account of whole nations.

By connecting the narratives of these women to current discussions on gender and cultural inclusivity, the study offers a relevant theological reflection that bridges ancient texts with modern societal issues. Generally, the genealogy in Matthew 1:3–6, especially the inclusion of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, stands as a testament to the rich diversity and complexity of biblical narratives. These women, rather than being mere participants in scandal, are revealed as key figures whose faith and actions played pivotal roles in the unfolding of salvation history. By challenging traditional

interpretations, this study opens up new avenues for appreciating the contributions of women within scriptural contexts and beyond, fostering a dialogue that celebrates diversity and promotes equality in various aspects of life.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the inclusion of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba in the genealogy of Jesus as presented in Matthew 1:3–6 challenges traditional interpretations that have often cast these women in the light of sinfulness or as mere gentile outliers. Instead, a reinterpretation focusing on their heroic deeds and profound faith reveals a more profound narrative at play. These women, through their resilience and faith, play pivotal roles in the unfolding of salvation history, challenging societal norms and extending the message of inclusivity and redemption beyond the confines of nationality or past actions.

Tamar's determination to secure her place within Judah's lineage through unconventional means, Rahab's courageous faith in the God of Israel, Ruth's devotion and integration into the Israelite community, and Bathsheba's complex journey from scandal to significant royal influence all contribute to a tapestry that reflects God's inclusive nature and divine plan. Their stories, marked by faith and courage, serve as enduring testimonies of God's ability to use diverse individuals to fulfil divine purposes.

This alternative view offers a richer understanding of the biblical genealogy, celebrating the diversity of the experiences that contribute to the lineage of Jesus. By embracing the complexity and depth of these women's stories, modern discussions on gender equality and cultural inclusivity are enriched. These narratives encourage contemporary society to reconsider the roles and contributions of women, both historically and in present contexts, fostering an environment where diversity is not only acknowledged but celebrated. Such reflection advocates for greater gender equality and challenges cultural prejudices, aligning with the broader human experience and opening new pathways for theological discourse and societal growth.

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Anyidoho, P & R El Chami 2025, 'Caesarea Philippi and Mark 8:27–35 as a Turning Point in the Discovery and Revelation of the Identity of Jesus Christ : Historical Linguistics Analysis', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 28-55

Caesarea Philippi and Mark 8:27–35 as a Turning Point in the Discovery and Revelation of the Identity of Jesus Christ: Historical Linguistics Analysis

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Abstract

The focus of the Gospel of Mark is the unveiling of the identity of Jesus Christ through reported events, space, people, and discourses which allow readers to discover his comprehensive identity. Mark 8:27–35 exemplifies this unveiling, as Mark guides his readers to the discovery of the identity of Christ. The question that guides this study is the following: why is the revelation of Jesus as Christ in the Gospel of Mark situated in his journey towards the landscape of Caesarea Philippi rather than in the landscape of his hometown of Nazareth, or along the Jordan River where he was baptised, or by the Sea of Galilee where he called his first disciples, or on the mountainside where he appointed the twelve? The hypothesis of this study is that Mark sets the revelation of the comprehensive identity of Jesus within an elastic narrative of Jesus' journey through the Caesarea Philippi landscape where shifts in features of language, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial scope shape the narrative about the revelation of the identity of Jesus as Christ. Campbell's historical linguistic model serves as the main method to explore the narrative about the revelation of the identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35 because his methodology

provides three significant nuances, the manner, place, and flow (or journey) of linguistic identity, which this study draws on to discuss the unfolding identity that Mark ascribes to Jesus in the landscape of Caesarea Philippi. These three nuances of method are significant through the lens of Caesarea Philippi's threefold identity shift: linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial. Campbell's (2013) historical linguistic method, enhanced by theoretical perspectives in van den Heever's (2010) social space, in Moxnes' (2010) landscape, and in Rose's (1996) genealogy of subjectification, underpins the analysis of Mark 8:27–35 to examine the process of discovering the comprehensive identity of Jesus Christ in Mark 8:27–35. This study argues that Caesarea Philippi serves as the turning point of an elastic narrative of three shifts – in linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial dimensions – in the revelation of the identity of Jesus as Christ. This study has two objectives. First, it hopes to contribute the theory and the methodology of historical linguistics to hermeneutics in biblical studies of Mark 8:27-35. Second, it strives to present nuance, to provide additional scope for understanding the identity that Mark ascribes to Jesus Christ in his gospel.

Introduction

This study examines the revelation of Jesus' identity in Mark 8:27–35 as an elastic narrative, a turning point, and a convergence moment in the Gospel of Mark where transformations in language, journey, landscape, and social space intersect. It has two main objectives: first, it contributes the historical linguistic method to biblical hermeneutics in interpreting this passage; and second, it offers new perspectives for understanding the identity Mark ascribes to Jesus. The study holds that the linguistic system through which Mark constructs his narrative plays a critical role in revealing three interrelated shifts: manner, place, and flow of Jesus' identity. Drawing on the theoretical framework of identity in Lyle Campbell's historical linguistics (2013), alongside Gerhard van den Heever's (2010) concept of social space, Halvor Moxnes' (2010) interpretation of landscape, and Nikolas Rose's (1996) genealogy of subjectification, this study situates the Marcan narrative within the evolving identity of Caesarea Philippi. It explores how language, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial scope converge in the gospel to shape Mark's

Christological portrait. The central research question guiding this project is: why does Mark situate the revelation of Jesus as Christ on the road to Caesarea Philippi, rather than in other meaningful locations such as his hometown of Nazareth, along the Jordan River where he was baptised, by the Sea of Galilee where he called his first disciples, or on the mountainside where he appointed the twelve? This study hypothesises that Mark reveals Jesus' comprehensive identity through an elastic narrative that unfolds in the landscape of Caesarea Philippi, where language, geography, and social meanings intersect. The term *elastic narrative* refers to the unfolding and adaptive portrayal of Jesus' identity through linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial shifts, particularly as Mark positions Jesus in Caesarea Philippi, the site where the disciples first recognise him as Christ.

Campbell's historical linguistic model provides the primary methodological framework for analysing this narrative. His approach emphasises three central aspects of the linguistic unit: (1) manner, (2) place, (3) flow. These three dimensions parallel the threefold transformation of Caesarea Philippi's identity as marked by linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial shifts. This method thus illustrates an elastic narrative movement in Mark 8:27-35. In this study, the *manner of articulation* refers to the linguistic units Mark uses, such as titles (e.g., 'son of man'), epithets (e.g., 'prophet'), nominal phrase (e.g., 'one of the prophets'), verbs (e.g., 'walking'), and qualifiers (e.g., 'of Nazareth'), to articulate Jesus' identity. *Place of articulation* refers to the physical landscape, such as road, region, village, mountain, sea, or desert, that Mark aligns with these linguistic features to construct his elastic narrative about Jesus. *Flow* denotes the socio-spatial categories such as roles, perceptions, functions, status, knowledge, interactions (e.g., with crowds, disciples, Pharisees), and mission that guide Mark's elastic narrative about unveiling Jesus' comprehensive identity in Mark 8:27-35. Within the scope of this study, *identity change* refers to any shift in feature, function, knowledge, or perception of a person, place, or linguistic unit. These shifts are not merely descriptive but significant for understanding the comprehensive identity of Jesus. Particular attention is paid to how Caesarea Philippi's evolving classificatory identity in religious, political, and linguistic terms becomes a hermeneutical key to understanding the Christological turning point in Mark's narrative. The following linguistic concepts are applied in this study as well:

- *Phoneme*: the smallest contrastive sound unit in a language
- *Morpheme*: the smallest dependent or independent unit of meaning in a word
- *Word*: a single and autonomous meaningful element of language
- *Noun phrase*: a structured phrase with a head noun and modifiers
- *Language contact*: the influence of one language on another through interaction

These linguistic categories offer insight to examine the identity shifts in Mark 8:27–35, particularly in the context of Caesarea Philippi.

Through an interdisciplinary method grounded in Campbell’s (2013) model of linguistic identity transformation, van den Heever’s (2010) social space theory, Moxnes’ (2010) landscape theory, and Rose’s (1996) concept of subjectification, this study supports the argument that Mark employs shifts in the manner, place, and flow of his elastic narrative to reveal new Christological dimensions of Jesus’ identity in Mark 8:27–35. The remainder of the study is structured as follows: section one reviews selected and relevant literature; section two outlines the conceptual framework; section three presents the analytical scope; section four discusses the socio-spatial and historical context of Caesarea Philippi; section five explores the linguistic implications of the narrative; and section six examines the psycholinguistic dimensions of the identity shift in Mark 8:27–35.

Literature Review

Previous research has examined identity shifts concerning Caesarea Philippi from archaeological, theological, and biblical hermeneutical perspectives. However, few studies have focused on how linguistic taxonomy and functional shifts in the identity of Caesarea Philippi serve as a hermeneutical lens for understanding the revelation of Jesus’ identity in Mark 8:27–35. This study addresses that gap by situating the unfolding identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35 within the theoretical frameworks of historical linguistics (Campbell 2013),

social space (van den Heever 2010), geographical landscape (Moxnes 2010), and the genealogy of subjectification (Rose 1996). Some scholars have examined the political, historical, and archaeological contexts of Caesarea Philippi without linking their findings directly to the Gospel of Mark (Friedland 2012; Ma'oz 2009; Wilson 2004). More recent studies have connected these contexts to Mark's gospel (Evans 2001; Lampe 2020; Leander 2013). From a hermeneutical perspective, Leander (2013) explores how Mark integrates various layers of Roman imperial identity into his narrative. Using a Christological approach, Marcus (2009) emphasises the tension between Jesus' divine identity and the messianic secret in Mark but does not address how this secret serves as a discourse technique to narrate identity shifts in Jesus' roles, functions, and perceptions. Lampe (2020) examines the implications of Peter's confession within the geographical context of Caesarea Philippi. Using a socio-rhetorical approach, Witherington identifies Mark 8:27–30 as one of five Christological disclosure moments in the gospel (2001:47). Edwards argues that Peter's confession in Mark 8:27–30 reveals that the gospel was written for a Gentile audience and emphasises the thematic role of the 'journey' motif in Mark's narrative from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem (2002:18–21). France describes Mark 8:27–33 as the watershed moment of Jesus' messianic mission (2002:326–327). Based on discourse forms of both intratextuality and intertextuality, Donahue and Harrington discuss the names and titles that Mark attributes to Jesus. They note that Mark prefers the Greek lexicon 'christos' (anointed) to 'masiah' (the anointed one). They affirm that 'masiah' occurs in the Old Testament in reference to the anointing of priests, prophets, and kings, but, in New Testament times, the reference depends on context and probably on socio-spatial, geographical landscape, and linguistic forms (Donahue and Harrington 2002:25). Telford discusses the theological significance of Jesus' identity in Mark and shows how the gospel draws on both Jewish and Gentile traditions through various epithets and titles (1999:30).

In archaeological scholarship, Ma'oz (2009), as well as Erlich and Lavi (2024), provides detailed accounts of identity shifts in Caesarea Philippi in relation to architecture, social functions, leadership, and public perception. Wilson (2004) discusses how the lexicons associated with Caesarea Philippi's name evolved from the name of the Greek god Paneas. Wilson and Tzaferis (2008) provide archaeological evidence of embedded identity artefacts and corresponding shifts in roles, functions, and statuses in the region of Caesarea Philippi.

Friedland (2012) illustrates the transformations of material culture around Caesarea Philippi, particularly the shift from stone to marble, from one altar to multiple altars, and from simple shrine to complex buildings. These studies illuminate the geographical and socio-spatial resources that Mark draws on in his elastic narrative to present the revelation of Jesus' comprehensive identity at Caesarea Philippi.

Conceptual Perspectives

Campbell's (2013) framework in historical linguistics provides a methodological tool for tracing how shifts in naming and classification emerge through changes in the manner of articulation, place of articulation, and airflow of phonemes. For example, in English phonology, the airflow (air journey) generates categories such as plosives (stops), fricatives, affricates, nasals, liquids, and glides. The place of articulation in English phonology classifies phonemes as bilabial, labiodental, dental, alveolar, alveopalatal, palatal, velar, or glottal. The manner of vibration of vocal cords during articulation further distinguishes sounds either as voiced or voiceless. Any change in these three categories (airflow, place, and manner) results in a new phonemic identity. The dimensions of manner, place, and flow together constitute the consonant system in English.

Campbell emphasises that linguistic systems undergo systematic identity shifts in sound, meaning, and form (2013:5). These shifts in phonology, semantics, and morphology constitute what he identifies as the taxonomic reclassification within historical linguistics. This study draws analogies from these shifts to explore identity change in Mark 8:27–35. Specifically, the elements of phonological identity (such as place and manner of articulation, as well as airflow) are conceptually mapped onto narrative features in Mark: the place of revelation, the manner of narrative expression, and the flow of Jesus' journey. Campbell's historical linguistic model thus offers a framework to analyse the elastic narrative in which the identity of Jesus is progressively revealed in relation to the shifting identity of Caesarea Philippi. In addition to Campbell, this study draws on Gerhard van den Heever's (2010) spatial theory, which argues that biblical narratives and rhetorical constructions of space create opportunities for new discourses, communal imaginations, and identity formations. According to van den Heever, these discursive transformations

occur when narrative units acquire new associations, functions, and symbolic meanings through their recontextualisation in space (2010:207–210). In his view, spaces traditionally marked as private, Judaic, or local in biblical texts are often reinscribed with imperial or public features, reshaping their identities within broader socio-spatial contexts. Moxnes (2010) similarly contends that individual and collective identities are closely tied to the local landscapes with which people are spatially and socially connected. In his landscape theory, a ‘landscape’ represents not only the physical environment but also a socio-symbolic domain of perception, experience, and meaning (2010:92). For him, during the time of Jesus, identity and place of origin were perceived as inseparable; one’s character and status were often inferred from their geographic and social roots (2010:90–93). Citing the Lucan narrative as an example, Moxnes shows that Jesus’ identity is conveyed through journeys across specific landscapes, emphasising how geographical features inform theology and community formation in the New Testament (2010:98).

Finally, this study draws on Nikolas Rose’s (1996) theory of genealogical subjectification, which conceptualises identity as an ongoing and discursively mediated process rather than a fixed psychological essence. Rose argues that subjectification is historically and socially constructed across different times and spaces (1996:128–129). Applied to Mark’s gospel, this perspective reveals how Jesus’ identity unfolds in relation to shifting public perceptions, naming practices, roles, and geographic contexts. It also parallels the evolving identity of Caesarea Philippi, thereby reinforcing the interplay between narrative subjectification and socio-spatial transformation.

Analytic Perspective

This section outlines the analytical method employed in this study. The study adopts a cross-disciplinary framework grounded primarily in the historical linguistics of Campbell (2013), complemented by conceptual elements of social space from van den Heever (2010), the landscape theory of Moxnes (2010), and the genealogy of subjectification notions of Rose (1996). This framework traces how Mark constructs an elastic narrative that reveals Jesus’ comprehensive identity in Mark 8:27–35 through three interwoven axes of transformation: linguistic, socio-spatial, and landscape. Drawing on Campbell (2013), this paper affirms that the taxonomy and nomenclature used to

describe features, names, places, and functions in the Gospel of Mark carried significant interpretive weight during the time of Jesus, and particularly during the time Mark wrote his gospel. Caesarea Philippi, like other territorial sites, experienced considerable identity shifts in its taxonomy classification over time. Contemporary archaeological research by Erlich and Lavi (2024) supports this understanding of Caesarea Philippi's evolving identity. These authors observe:

The shift in plan from the first phase is not substantial, but the long span of use suggests changes in use, supported by three elements: the archaeological finds, the historical sources, and parallels. (Erlich and Lavi 2024:231)

These structural and functional shifts in Caesarea Philippi's sacred architecture are not merely material; they provide a contextual background that informs the narrative logic of Mark 8:27–35. The classificatory transformation of Caesarea Philippi and its reclassification as a religious, political, and cultural space parallel the unfolding identity of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. This study interprets such shifts as the integration of linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial features into the evolving taxonomic reclassification and reassignments of meaning and functions of a person, a place, a perception, etc. This is the case in Mark's elastic narrative about the revelation of the comprehensive identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35.

These taxonomic changes constitute the analytic framework of this study. The variables deployed to measure identity shift include features, roles, functions, statuses, public or private perceptions, and ideals. In this context, *linguistics* refers to phonemes (sound), lexicon (word), and semantics (meaning); *geographical landscape* refers to geographical elements such as rivers, valleys, mountains, roads, ways, and built environments; and *socio-spatial scope* encompasses human habitations, cities, homes, marketplaces, temples, and synagogues.

This study argues that the evolving identity of Caesarea Philippi across linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial domains provides an interpretive lens through which Mark stages a pivotal moment of Christological revelation of a new epithet in the comprehensive identity of Jesus. Mark 8:27–

35 thus serves as a watershed and a turning point in the elastic narrative about Jesus' identity regarding the shifts in taxonomy about the landscape, socio-spatial, and linguistic features of Caesarea Philippi, where Mark locates the revelation of Jesus as Christ. The next section details the data and findings of this analysis.

Data and Context of Caesarea Philippi

This section examines the diachronic changes in the names, functions, roles, modelling, and symbolic attributes of Caesarea Philippi. Drawing on archaeological research, Erlich and Lavi (2024) describe a shifting relationship between sacred space and architectural transformation in the region of Caesarea Philippi:

The Paneas cave witnessed changes in function and its modeling, from the cultic to the royal and back to cultic, and from a wild place to a built complex. (Erlich and Lavi 2024:234)

This study analyses these changes within the context of Mark 8:27–35 through the conceptual frameworks of Campbell (2013), van den Heever (2010), Moxnes (2010), and Rose (1996), arguing that the narrative setting of Mark 8:27–35 is informed by Caesarea Philippi's evolving identity. The gradual reconfiguration of this region's naming conventions, architectural functions, and socio-political roles parallels the progressive disclosure of Jesus' messianic identity in the Marcan gospel. In this way, the textual narrative of Mark 8:27–35 is both shaped by and reflective of Caesarea Philippi's shifting linguistic taxonomy of classification and reclassification. The next subsections present examples of the shifts in Caesarea Philippi's linguistic taxonomy to offer the analytic background for interpreting the shifting identity that Mark ascribes to Jesus in Mark 8:27–35 within the geographical landscape of Caesarea Philippi.

Shift in the Identity of the Phoneme: from /p/ to/ b/

Erlich and Lavi (2024) note that the territory of Caesarea Philippi was originally named Paneas, derived from the name of the god Pan: 'The site is mentioned in ancient sources as Paneion or Paneas, a cult place for the god Pan'

(2024:207; see also Polybius 2010). Regarding the original name of the territory of Caesarea Philippi, Erlich and Lavi further note the following:

The Pan cave, cliff, terrace, and springs formed an imposing setting for human activity in antiquity. The earliest evidence of the Pan cult is from the Hellenistic period when the place was named after the Greek god Paneas. (Erlich and Lavi 2024:234)

Ma'oz (2009) confirms that there are lexical variants in written documents about Paneas or Banias. Erlich and Lavi contend that there is a phonetic shift in the name Paneas, which became Banias, because of language contact between Greek and Arabic speakers (2024:207; see also Eusebius 2019). This new pronunciation gained currency both in spoken language and in written documents before the era of King Herod the Great, when the Paneas area was just a rural community. The two phonemes /p/ and /b/ share two phonemic features: they are plosives (stops), referring to airflow when they are articulated in the mouth (i.e., flow or air journey), and both are bilabials because they are articulated between closed lips (i.e., place of articulation). The only difference between the two is the manner of vibration of vocal cords during articulation, making /b/ voiced and /p/ unvoiced (i.e., manner of articulation).

Erlich and Lavi highlight the evolving ritualistic and symbolic importance of Paneas, especially in relation to cultic and prophetic traditions that predate Christianity:

Ma'oz (2009: 10–11) brings Eusebius, as well as a rabbinic source telling that the messiah will come when the water in the Paneas cave turns to blood (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a–98b), as testimony of hydromantic rituals. Indeed, water was related to an oracle, as in the Apollo Thyrxeus cult in Lycia, mentioned by Pausanias (VII.xxi.13). Thus, the cave and courtyard at Paneas probably served several cults. First and foremost, it was dedicated to Pan; and second, a hydromantic cult that took place on certain festivals (perhaps once a year?). (Erlich and Lavi 2024:233; see also Wilson and Tzaferis 2008:200)

Ma'oz (2009) specifies that the phonemic shift from *Paneas* to *Banias* produces other orthographic variants of *Banias* such as the written variant *Baniyas* in the literature about *Paneas*. This written variant of *Banias* does not constitute a phonemic shift because the vowel [i] in *Banias* is replaced by the vowel [y] in *Baniyas*. This variant at best constitutes only a phonetic shift in pronunciation.

The phonemic shift from voiceless /p/ in *Paneas* to voiced /b/ in *Banias* or *Baniyas* is evidence of a shift in phonemic identity or feature of the phoneme /p/. This shift illustrates that there is a competing identity or feature of the Arab phonemic system during the language contact of this latter with the phonemic system of the Canaanite. During this language contact the feature or function of the Canaanite phoneme /p/ adopts the phonemic system of the Arabic phoneme system by becoming the voiced phoneme /b/ in *Banias* or *Baniyas*. This shows that identity shift in the lexicon of *Paneas* occurs in the context of competing identities during which one linguistic identity prevails. Thus, the renaming of *Paneas* to *Banias* is more than a sound change. It is an early sign of identity shift that anticipates the theological reidentification of the region. Table 1 presents this *Paneas* phonemic shift.

Table 1. *Paneas* Phonemic Shift

Plosive (manner of air flow)	<u>Taxonomy</u>	<u>Bilabial (place of articulation)</u>	<u>Vocal cord vibration</u>
	Paneas	/p/	Voiced
	Banias	/b/	Voiceless

This phonemic shift is not just a linguistic detail but serves as a precursor to broader identity shifts in Caesarea Philippi. Ma'oz (2009) notes that the taxonomy shift from *Paneas* to *Baniyas* (*Banias*) coincides with architectural changes and functions of temples for Zeus and Pan. This shift brings about the construction of new temples and structural architecture for entities such as Nemesis, nymphs, courtyards, tomb-temples, streets, channels, and coins. This shift from a singular temple devoted to Pan towards a pluralised sacred

landscape reflects a broader pattern of competing religious and political identities. These transformations provide a platform for layered claims to power and identity within the region – claims that are highly relevant to the setting of Mark 8:27–35, where Jesus’ identity is revealed. It introduces the first in a series of transformations that culminate in the identity revelation scene in Mark 8:27–35.

Shift in Morphology: From *Banias* to *Augusteum*

Following the phonemic shift from /b/ to /p/ regarding the word *Paneas*, another shift emerged in the linguistic taxonomy of Caesarea Philippi. This shift occurred during King Herod the Great’s era (37–4 BC). He built a new temple near Banias dedicated to Emperor Caesar Augustus. He named it Augusteum (Erlich and Lavi 2024:209, 222, 233; Ma’oz 2009:40–60). In the aftermath of this, some people referred to the area as Banias, while others referred to it as Augusteum (Erlich and Lavi 2024:211).

This morphological shift from the temple name *Banias* to *Augusteum* produces shifts in the function of the temples as well as the linguistic taxonomy for Banias. These shifts in functions are threefold: (1) there is a shift from the location of the rock for the temple of Pan to the location of the rock for the Augusteum temple; (2) there is a shift from a rural cult solely for Pan to gradually urbanised cults for both Pan and Zeus; (3) there is a shift from ancient Canaanite architecture to Roman architecture. These three shifts in function attest that the morphological shifts occur within a context of competing identities associated with Banias and the identities attributed to Augustus Caesar whose temple bears the eponym *Augusteum*. Slowly, there emerge multiple cults, cultures, identities, functions, temples, powers, persons, perceptions, statuses, and eponyms. This ongoing shift in linguistic, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial fabric of Caesarea Philippi serves as the locus for Mark’s narrative about the revelation of the comprehensive identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35.

Lexical shift: From *Augusteum* to *Caesarea*

A significant lexical shift occurred around 2 BC, when Philip the Tetrarch, son of Herod the Great, renamed the territory of Paneas as Caesarea, in honour of

Caesar Augustus. This renaming is more than a political gesture; it represents a taxonomic reclassification of place identity. The new toponym 'Caesarea' introduces an imperial semantic layer that frames the narrative backdrop of Mark 8:27–35, where a new lexicon – 'the Christ' in Greek or 'Messiah' in Hebrew – emerges to signify Jesus' new identity. This shift in nomenclature catalysed broader changes in Caesarea Philippi's socio-political and architectural status. The site transitioned from a rural locality to an urban administrative centre as Philip established his capital there, constructing a palace complex and associated civic infrastructure. This constitutes also a shift from the name *Augusteum*, which designates one temple, to the name *Caesarea*, which designates an entire city.

Roman architectural forms and imperial symbols of identity began to coexist with pre-existing Canaanite cultic structures, particularly those related to the god Pan. Consequently, the region became a convergence point for diverse identities, deities, religious rituals, political authorities, perceptions, statuses, persons, people, questions, journeys, and material cultures. The layering of these socio-spatial, physical landscape, and linguistic elements forms the watershed or turning point on which Mark constructs his additional scope of Christological narrative in Mark 8:27–35.

Shift in the Nominal Phrase: From *Caesarea* to *Caesarea Philippi*

Another notable shift in the linguistic taxonomy of Paneas likely occurred during the reign of either Agrippa I (the nephew of Philip the Tetrarch) or Agrippa II (the son of Agrippa I). During this period, the region came to be designated as Caesarea of Philip (*Caesarea Philippi* in Latin), evolving from a single lexical unit (*Paneas*) into a nominal phrase that incorporated imperial and dynastic associations. This lexical transformation was accompanied by architectural and functional changes, particularly within the sacred landscape of the original Paneas temple complex.

According to Erlich and Lavi, the cave at the centre of the cultic site underwent key modifications:

[T]he cave [...] was still full of water, with the rock that protruded from the water like a small island. This rock might have carried a Pan statue, similar to the depiction of Pan in a grotto on some of the Roman coins of Caesarea Philippi. (2024:231)

Erlich and Lavi further argue that Agrippa II oversaw extensive renovations of both the temple and palace structures, formally designating Caesarea Philippi the capital of his dynasty. In other words, Paneas as a site for rural cultic functions becomes Caesarea Philippi, a capital for multiple functions including cultic, administrative, infrastructural, and layered identities. As part of this transformation, the naturally occurring cave was reconceptualised and restructured as a Romanised sacred space, incorporating architectural motifs and ideological functions consistent with imperial identity.

These lexical, architectural, and functional reclassifications contribute to the evolving socio-linguistic, geographical-landscape, and socio-spatial backdrop of the shifting identity of Caesarea Philippi. Within this layered landscape, the identity question Jesus asks his disciples in Mark 8:27–35 gains added interpretive resonance. This background may shed light partly on the reasons why Mark probably situates the revelation of the comprehensive identity of Jesus in his journey in the landscape of Caesarea Philippi, rather than in the landscape of his hometown of Nazareth, or along the Jordan River where he was baptised, or by the Sea of Galilee where he called his first disciples, or on the mountainside where he appointed the twelve. Indeed, as Jesus and his followers approach the region, the narrative implicitly engages with the symbolic weight of a space marked by historical shifts in naming, function, and cultural authority embodied in Caesarea Philippi. Table 2 (below) outlines the progressive taxonomic changes in the designation of Paneas and their significance for understanding the setting of Mark 8:27–35.

Table 2. Shift of Classificatory Names of the Paneas Territory

<u>Type</u>	<u>Taxonomy</u>	<u>Era</u>	<u>Reign</u>	<u>Date</u>

Morphemic	Banias	Before Herod the Great	Hellenistic	200–198 BC
Morphological	Augusteum	Under Herod the Great	Roman	37–4BC
Lexical	Caesarea	Philip the Tetrarch	Roman	2 BC
Nominal phrase	Caesarea Philippi	Agrippa I & II	Roman	1 st century AD

Linguistic Implications of a Shift in the Identity of Jesus Christ

This section examines the linguistic implications of the lexical shifts in the comprehensive identity of Jesus by following the scope of Campbell's historical linguistics (2013), alongside van den Heever's (2010) concept of social space, Moxnes' (2010) interpretation of landscape, and Rose's (1996) genealogy of subjectification. Although Mark introduces Jesus to his readers in the very first clause of his gospel by specifying that his narrative concerns the 'Christ, the Son of God' (1:1), this aspect of Jesus' identity remains veiled throughout the early chapters of the gospel until Mark 8:27–35. Mark uses the Greek form 'Christos' rather than the Hebrew form 'Masiah' to designate the 'Anointed One'. This revelation remains concealed from key religious and political figures, including the teachers of the law, Pharisees, Herodians, King Herod, Pilate, priests, elders, and scribes. The only exception is the impure spirits who try to reveal Jesus' full identity in public in Mark 1:24¹ with two epithets ('Jesus

¹ Direct Bible quotations are from Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1996, *The Holy Bible: New international version, containing the Old Testament and the New Testament*, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. This Bible version is compared with

of Nazareth' and 'Holy One of God') and Mark 5:7 with one epithet ('Jesus, Son of the Most High God').

The revelation and discovery of a comprehensive identity of Jesus involves a shift or a change comparable to the linguistic shift in the identity of Caesarea Philippi, as explicitly seen in Mark 8:27–35, in which Peter declares that Jesus is Christ. Between Mark 1 and Mark 8:26, the vocabularies that Mark employs to describe the identity of Jesus includes the following: 'my Son' (Mark 1:11, 3:11), 'Jesus of Nazareth' (Mark 1:24), 'fellow' (Mark 2:7), 'Son of Man' (Mark 2:10, 27), 'Son of God' (Mark 3:11), 'Teacher' (Mark 4:38; Mark 5:35), 'Lord' (Mark 5:19, Mark 7:28), 'Carpenter' (Mark 6:3), 'John the Baptist' raised from the dead (Mark 6:14, 16), 'Elijah' (Mark 6:15), and 'Prophet' (Mark 6:15). These titles or epithets attest to a gradual shift in the revelation of the identity of Jesus to his audiences and interlocutors. Mark 8:27–35, situated in Caesarea Philippi, marks a pivotal moment in this progression, where Jesus' identity is most explicitly affirmed. Caesarea Philippi is an appropriate setting for this, as it has undergone its own linguistic shifts concerning its identity, taxonomy, and function, as with the shift from Jesus of Nazareth to Jesus, the Christ (Messiah). This linguistic shift, within the integrated conceptual scope of Campbell (2013), van den Heever (2010), Moxnes (2010), and Rose (1996), implies a new phase of understanding, function, responsibility, and commitment for Jesus, his audience, and even the author, Mark.

The shift toward recognising Jesus' full identity unfolds gradually. Jesus himself was surprised by his disciples' lack of understanding of his identity, first in the parables of his teaching (Mark 4:13), second with respect to food purity and hygiene (Mark 7:18), third concerning the yeast of the Pharisee and that of Herod (Mark 8:17), and fourth regarding the multiplication of the loaves (Mark 6:52). Jesus sometimes guides his apostles through their process of understanding his identity through his teaching (Mark 4:33–35). In other instances, Jesus asks a crowd of his listeners to understand the difference between the word of God and human traditions (Mark 7:14–15). On some occasions, there are contradictory expectations. For example, Jesus did not want his miracles to be proclaimed in public (such as in the cases of impure

the Greek version in K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren, 1975, *The Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, New York.

spirits in Mark 1:25 and Mark 3:12, the deaf and mute man in Mark 7:36, and the *Talitha kum* incident in Mark 5:43), but he also tells a demon-possessed man to go home and proclaim his healing (Mark 5:19). These narrative tensions underscore that the recognition of Jesus' identity unfolded gradually, carrying implications for how Jesus and his followers were to understand their roles and commitments in new ways in his journey along the linguistic system, geographical landscape, and socio-spatial scope. This gradual process involved a trajectory of revelation and discovery of a comprehensive identity of Jesus from Mark 1 to Mark 8:27: a movement from ambiguity to clarity, from miracles to parables and back again to miraculous acts, culminating in the recognition of Jesus as the Christ. The following discussion focuses on the details of four lexical shifts in the name of the identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35 alone.

Shift from *Jesus* to *John the Baptist*

In Mark 8:28, it is presumed that both the disciples and the audience already recognise Jesus by name, a basic element of his identity, as was the practice at the time of the Marcan community. As they journey toward Caesarea Philippi, Jesus enquires about how he is publicly perceived. The disciples report that some people, including King Herod, identify him as John the Baptist, echoing earlier references in Mark 6:14 and 6:16. This moment constitutes the first instance of lexical substitution in the unfolding discourse of Jesus' identity in Mark 27–35. In fact, Herod and others replace Jesus' name with that of John the Baptist, a rhetorical manoeuvre that parallels the reclassification of *Paneas* through a process whereby three titles, namely *Augusteum*, *Caesarea*, and *Philippi*, became substitute names for the village and region of Paneas/Banias.

John the Baptist, as the forerunner of Jesus, holds a preparatory role in the Marcan gospel narrative. The substitution of his name for that of Jesus suggests that the crowd assigns to John the Baptist an elevated status that surpasses ordinary human identification. Thus, Herod's assertion in Mark 6:16 that Jesus might be John the Baptist raised from the dead attributes to Jesus a form of resurrected identity, even supernatural power. In this perspective, by assigning the qualities of John the Baptist to Jesus, the crowd ascribes to Jesus new status, new function, new perception, and new power. This interpretive gesture ascribes to Jesus a celestial identity, resonating with the broader

semantic and cultural contestations surrounding identity and authorities embodied in the linguistic taxonomy of Caesarea Philippi and its surrounding regions.

Shift from *Jesus* to *Elijah*

In Mark 8:28, a second lexical substitution occurs when the crowd identifies Jesus with the prophet Elijah. This attribute suggests that Jesus is associated with the prophetic functions and miraculous works traditionally ascribed to Elijah. Given that Caesarea Philippi was already a contested locus of divine identities, including Baal the Canaanite fertility god, Pan the Greek river god, and Zeus the chief Greek god, the positioning of the narrative of the new identity of Jesus at the landscape of Caesarea Philippi echoes how Elijah triumphed in cultic offering over other gods represented by Baal in 1 Kings 18:20–40. To equate Jesus with Elijah is to recognise him within a similar spiritual hierarchy and symbolic stature as Pan and Zeus, thereby situating him among the competing sacred identities of deities associated with the region.

This substitution also implies that the crowd perceives Jesus' identity as transcending ordinary human categories, extending across both earthly and celestial realms. Mark 9:4 later reinforces this transcendental characterisation, as Elijah and Moses appear in conversation with Jesus during the transfiguration. Moreover, in Mark 9:11–13, Jesus himself affirms Elijah's eschatological role as a forerunner to the suffering son of man, thereby integrating Elijah's narrative into his own messianic trajectory. Thus, this lexical shift from Jesus to qualities of Elijah assign to Jesus new functions in Mark 8:27–35 at the landscape of Caesarea Philippi, shaping the unfolding revelation of Jesus' comprehensive identity in a landscape saturated with socio-spatial statuses and linguistic meanings.

Shift from *Jesus* to *One of the Prophets*

In Mark 8:28, a third lexical shift occurs through the substitution of Jesus' name with a nominal phrase: 'one of the prophets'. Unlike the previous substitutions involving specific prophetic figures such as John the Baptist or Elijah, this instance replaces Jesus' identity with a generic prophetic category. This broader substitution implies that some in the crowd perceive Jesus as fulfilling

a prophetic function, but without the clarity or consensus to associate him with any specific figure from Israel's prophetic tradition. Such a generic attribution reflects the complex matrix of competing identities present in Caesarea Philippi, a region layered with Canaanite, Greek, and Roman religious significance. Within this context, the crowd's use of a vague prophetic category may reflect socio-spatial ambiguity or cautious anticipation. It is possible that the crowd is deferring to Jesus himself to clarify his position within the contested socio-spatial and geographical landscape for precise linguistic taxonomy of identity. After all, the people at the time of Jesus and during the redaction of Mark's gospel opt for clarity by leaning their knowledge and perception on the things, places, persons, traditions, landscape with which they are familiar. This interpretive possibility aligns with Jesus' own self-understanding and perception in Mark 6:4, where he identifies with the prophetic tradition, acknowledging the rejection prophets face in familiar settings. Therefore, this third lexical shift, moving from specific prophetic figures to a general prophetic role, underscores the narrative tension between public speculation (perception) and the yet-to-be-revealed messianic identity of Jesus. It sets the stage for the climactic moment in Mark 8:29, where Peter moves beyond public conjecture to make a definitive Christological claim.

Shift from *Jesus* to *Christ*

Mark 8:29 presents a fourth lexical shift, as Peter proclaims, 'You are the Christ'. This marks the first time in the Gospel of Mark that a human character, apart from the narrator, explicitly identifies Jesus using the messianic title 'Christ'. This moment constitutes a narrative and theological turning point in the gospel, as it marks the transition from public speculation to a confessional recognition of Jesus' divine mission. The term 'Christ' (Greek *Christos*, meaning 'anointed one') reframes Jesus' identity beyond prophetic or historical categories, and signals a messianic role that culminates in the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (see Mark 16).

The lexical substitution of 'Jesus' with 'Christ' serves not only as a confessional act by Peter but also as a theological elevation of Jesus' role and function within the layered socio-spatial and geographical landscape of Caesarea Philippi. This identity shift repositions Jesus within a hierarchy of contested identities in the region, surpassing imperial, political, and divine figures such

as Caesar Augustus, Herod the Great, Philip the Tetrarch, Agrippa I and II, the river god Pan, and the Arab interlocutor. Each of these figures previously contributed to the phonemic and lexical configuration of the evolving identity of Caesarea Philippi territory. In contrast, Peter's declaration installs Jesus as the definitive bearer of God's redemptive mission, one whose authority transcends the temporal and spatial constraints of Caesarea Philippi. Thus, this fourth lexical shift solidifies Jesus' position as the Christ and sets in motion the narrative trajectory toward his suffering, death, and eventual glorification, redefining the spatial and theological boundaries within which his identity is recognised and proclaimed in Mark 8:27–35.

Shift from *Christ* to the *Son of Man*

Mark 8:31 introduces a fifth lexical and theological shift, as Jesus refers to himself as the 'Son of Man'. This shift redefines the function of Jesus beyond the messianic title 'Christ', moving toward a more complex self-identification grounded in the eschatological and redemptive narrative of suffering, death, and resurrection (Mark 8:32). The designation 'Son of Man' invokes a rich tradition of apocalyptic literature (see Daniel 7:13–14) and emphasises not only Jesus' divine mission but also his full participation in human vulnerability and suffering. This lexical substitution from 'Christ' to 'Son of Man' represents a humane moment in the narrative structure of Mark. It marks the deepening of Jesus' identity from a triumphant messianic figure to a suffering redeemer. Theological expectations and perceptions held by the crowd, the disciples, and other stakeholders in Caesarea Philippi are thus subverted in the landscape of Caesarea Philippi. Whereas 'Christ' may have carried connotations of political deliverance or royal authority, 'Son of Man' introduces a paradoxical function: one that entails rejection, suffering, crucifixion, and eventual vindication through resurrection.

The narrative juxtaposes these tensions through a series of binaries – submission and victory, rejection and exaltation, death and resurrection – that ultimately elevate Jesus' identity above the historical, religious, and imperial referents embedded in the identity of Caesarea Philippi. This layered identity transcends the eponyms of the territory (e.g., Caesar Augustus, Pan, and Philip the Tetrarch) by situating Jesus' function within both divine will and human agency, offering a radically new framework for understanding messianic

identity within the contested popular perceptions, landscape, and socio-spatial horizon of first-century Palestine. Table 3 presents again the lexical shifts concerning the revelation and the discovery of the comprehensive identity of Jesus.

Table 3. Lexical Shifts about the Comprehensive Identity of Jesus in Mark 8:27–35

<u>Primary</u>	<u>Posterior</u>	<u>Initiator</u>	<u>Function</u>
Jesus	John the Baptist	Crowd or King Herod	Reemerge the Baptist
Jesus	Elijah	Anonymous crowd	Resurface Elijah
Jesus	One of the prophets	Anonymous crowd	Generic proclamation
Jesus	Christ	Peter	Messiah
Christ	Son of Man	Jesus	Salvation

The five lexical shifts in the revelation of Jesus’ identity in Mark 8:27–35 correspond to parallel shifts in the nomenclature and socio-linguistic taxonomy of the Paneas territory. This correlation raises a critical question: why does Jesus choose the road to Caesarea Philippi as the setting for his inquiry into his identity? Why not Nazareth, his hometown; the Jordan, where he was baptised; the Sea of Galilee, where he first called his disciples; or the mountainside, where he appointed the twelve? The most plausible explanation is that Caesarea Philippi, as a territory marked by successive renaming and layered identities, from Paneas to Augusteum to Caesarea Philippi, provides a fitting geographical and symbolic parallel to the evolving understanding of Jesus’ comprehensive identity.

The narrative structure of Mark 8:27–35 thus becomes a turning point not only in Jesus’ self-revelation but also in the disciples’ layered perception of his identity. This process unfolds in six distinct yet interconnected stages. First, the disciples report the public’s varying identifications of Jesus. Second, Peter, acting as spokesperson, declares Jesus to be the Christ. Third, Jesus attributes Peter’s confession to divine revelation (see Matthew 16:17). Fourth, Peter immediately misunderstands the implications of this identity by resisting the notion of a suffering Christ. Fifth, Jesus rebukes Peter, redirecting the disciples’ framework of perception. Sixth, Jesus unveils the function of the ‘Son of Man’, a role marked by suffering, death, resurrection, and eventual ascension. These six stages mirror the layered taxonomic shifts of Caesarea Philippi, underscoring the gospel’s rhetorical strategy of linking physical landscape with biblical revelation, socio-spatial statuses, and linguistic taxonomy. Just as Caesarea Philippi underwent renaming and architectural transformation to reflect shifting imperial and religious identities, so too does Jesus’ identity become progressively reclassified through public perception, apostolic confession, divine revelation, correction, and eschatological fulfilment. In these cases, the taxonomy is not merely semantic but ontological – disclosing deeper truths about identity, perception, function, feature, authority, and mission in a contested socio-spatial and geographical landscape.

Psycholinguistic Implications of the Shift in the Identity of Jesus Christ

This section examines the psycholinguistic implications involved in the revelation and discovery of Jesus’ comprehensive identity, framed within Campbell’s (2013), van den Heever’s (2010), Moxnes’ (2010), and Rose’s (1996) integrated notions of identity shifts. It explores how cognition, language, and social dynamics shape the perception and belief regarding Jesus’ identity among his disciples and the gospel audience in Mark 8:27–35. Jesus begins by interrogating his disciples on how his identity is publicly recognised, prompting Peter’s declaration that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). Jesus then predicts his own death and calls his disciples to take up their crosses and follow him. By initially asking ‘Who do people say that I am?’, Jesus requires his disciples to draw upon episodic and semantic memory systems to retrieve socially shared beliefs (Mahr and Csibra 2018). Moreover, this process involves theory of mind capabilities, enabling the disciples to infer others’ mental states

and beliefs (Apperly 2012). Subsequently, Jesus narrows the inquiry to a personal level, inviting his disciples to reflect on their own understanding of his identity, a process requiring self-referential cognition (Bentley, Greenaway, and Haslam 2017; Pitre and Barron 2016). Since Jesus had not yet fully disclosed his identity, Peter responds based on intuitive cognition, unconsciously linking Jesus' actions with the semantic construct of the 'Messiah' (Patterson and Eggleston 2017).

Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ entails three psycholinguistic processes: (1) lexical retrieval from verbal memory, (2) conceptual understanding of the term, and (3) contextual integration of its theological and cultural significance (Yoon and Brown-Schmidt 2019). Notably, the disciples' understanding of Jesus' identity diverges from prevailing societal views, creating a perceptual dissonance between their perspective and the broader public's perspective. Jesus neither explicitly confirms nor denies Peter's statement, thereby allowing inferential reasoning among the disciples. This enables them to integrate prior knowledge with new contextual information, progressing toward a deeper grasp of Jesus' identity (Feng et al. 2021). Jesus' questioning, therefore, is not aimed at eliciting new information but rather guiding the disciples to self-discovery, as the timing was not yet appropriate for full disclosure, as indicated by his command for secrecy until at the landscape of Caesarea Philippi in Mark 8:27–35.

In Mark 8:27–35, Jesus employs emotionally charged and candid language to teach that the Son of Man will face rejection, suffering, and death, which induces cognitive dissonance within the disciples (Cooper 2007). The prevailing expectation of a triumphant messiah clashes with Jesus' portrayal of a suffering servant. This clash disrupts the disciples' existing schema, generating internal conflict between their beliefs and the emerging reality. Peter's emotional response overrides his earlier logical identification of Jesus as Christ, leading him to reject Jesus' salvific mission of suffering. Jesus' sharp rebuke, labelling Peter 'Satan', signifies a lexical and conceptual shift in both their vocabularies and understandings. Thus, the revelation and discovery of Jesus' identity in Caesarea Philippi reframes the messianic schema, demonstrating how cognition, language, and social interaction dynamically influence identity perception and belief formation among Jesus' disciples and the narrative audience.

Conclusion

This study has examined why Jesus chooses to ask about his identity specifically in the geographical landscape of Caesarea Philippi, highlighting the significance of that setting as a narrative and symbolic space marked by both linguistic, socio-spatial, and functional shifts. Drawing on integrated theories of shifts in identity features in Campbell's (2013), van den Heever's (2010), and Moxnes' (2010) work, the analysis demonstrates how shifts in the taxonomy of Caesarea Philippi parallel the unfolding revelation of Jesus's identity in Mark 8:27–35. The diachronic changes in place names, from Paneas to Caesarea Philippi, reflect broader sociopolitical and religious redefinitions, which serve as a backdrop to the evolving designations of Jesus, from 'Teacher' and 'Son of Man' to 'Christ'. These lexical transitions mark a turning point not only in narrative structure but in the disciples' cognitive and linguistic frameworks. The parallelism between geographic renaming and the identity revelation of Jesus reveals that the setting is not incidental but essential to the moment of transformation in Mark 8:35. The convergence of psycholinguistic processing, social dynamics, and evolving lexical attribution demonstrates how identity – both territorial and messianic – is constructed through layered shifts in language, cognition, and context. Ultimately, the study concludes that the narrative placement of Mark 8:27–35 at Caesarea Philippi serves as a deliberate literary strategy to unveil Jesus' comprehensive identity at a symbolic crossroads of both geographical landscape and socio-spatial contested domain. Mark 8:27–35 is thus a watershed and a turning point of the revelation of the comprehensive yet unexpected identity of Christ as the suffering messiah to whom Mark ascribes shifting roles, functions, perceptions, missions, and narrative layers in view of both Gentile audience and Marcan community represented by the geographical landscape of Caesarea Philippi.

Furthermore, this analysis reveals that the identity of Jesus in Mark is not static but dynamically negotiated through linguistic shifts that reflect broader private (Jesus and his disciples) and collective (Jesus, his disciples, and the crowd) tensions of status, perception, and power. The disciples' gradual understanding mirrors the audience's journey from confusion to clarity, mediated by language that encodes both the historical context of tradition and emerging Christological insights of Jesus and his followers. This dynamic

process underscores the role of language as a vehicle for biblical inquiry, demonstrating how Mark's gospel engages its readers in an active process of interpretation shaped by memory, cognition, and cultural milieu. The setting of Caesarea Philippi, with its complex history of religious plurality and contested political authority, becomes a microcosm where Jesus' identity is contested, revealed, and redefined.

Finally, situating the revelation of Jesus' identity at Caesarea Philippi invites reflection on the broader implications for identity formation in biblical narratives in terms of manner, flow, and place of articulation. It illustrates how place, language, and social context coalesce to create spaces of transformation where new meanings emerge. For the early Christian community, the Marcan community, and for contemporary readers, this passage highlights the transformative potential inherent in moments of questioning and revelation. By foregrounding the linguistic, socio-spatial, and geographical landscape dimensions of identity in Mark 8:27–35, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Mark negotiates and constructs identities of Jesus that resonate across Canaanite, Hebrew, and Graeco-Roman cultures during his time of writing the gospel, inviting his readers to discover the complex person of Jesus as both human and divine, or suffering messiah and glorious messiah, within the landscape of Caesarea of Philippi.

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Alamu, AA 2025, 'Samaritan Compassion (Luke 10:25–37) and African Socioeconomic Problems', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 56-79

Samaritan Compassion (Luke 10:25–37) and African Socioeconomic Problems

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Abstract

The worsening conditions of many African states have caught global attention for a very long time with no end in sight. It is concerning that oppressive leadership, which does not promote the common good of the populace, permeates the African landscape. This development has aggravated social disparity and discrimination and caused great havoc to the psyche and wellbeing of the African masses. However, the debacle results from a complex matrix; it is unacceptable to pin it solely on the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism. With vast African resources, the term 'poor Africans' ought to be a misnomer. Thus, using a literary-critical approach, this paper presents the argument that imbibing the Samaritan's compassion can significantly address Africa's socioeconomic problems. Avoiding the pitfalls of the robbers, the priest, and the Levite, through a lifestyle of love and compassion in policies and programmes, will help mitigate African socioeconomic issues.

Introduction

Much has been written about Africa's richness in diverse natural and human resources, and its ironic resource curse. The wealth of natural resources of the continent makes it the perpetual bride of the global capitalist economy whose interest is not to solve its socioeconomic problems. While the socioeconomic problems remain and efforts are being made toward a laudable and effective solution, there is a need to underscore the role of the religious dimension. It is

noteworthy that sacred texts and their interpretations have influenced people's socioeconomic conditions globally in a way that shapes peoples' beliefs about God's involvement and control of their socioeconomic status. Although some nations in Europe and America have seized the benefits of the sacred texts to lay the foundations for socioeconomic development, there has yet to be much leverage of such in sub-Saharan Africa. As such, there is not enough emphasis on human responsibility, including that of governments, in transforming socioeconomic conditions. From a Christian standpoint, therefore, there is an urgent need to renew efforts at infusing biblical precepts and paradigms into lifestyles, which can improve the socioeconomic conditions of individuals and communities in a manner that is true to the intent of the scripture.

In light of the foregoing, this paper posits that the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37 ESV) provides a paradigm of compassion, which, when infused into personal and governmental policies and programmes, would help improve Africa's socioeconomic conditions. The parable's profound emphasis on and reinterpretation of love for God and one's neighbour is the foundation for the limitless application of compassion. It demands a shift from norms and prejudices that keep society apart and down in terrible conditions; instead, it promotes the need to transcend ethnic and class boundaries by showing compassion to people in distress. The Samaritan is a moral example emphasising the importance of showing compassion in social interaction. It is instructive that Jesus (and Luke) gives voice and exceptional attention to the Samaritan as a model of morality to emulate. It is crucial to note that Jesus, while proffering a solution to the problem inherent in the lawyer's question of who is my neighbour, throws a challenge to the lawyer, the larger audience and followers, and readers to show compassion to people in distress by his statement, 'Go, and do likewise' (Luke 10:37 ESV). Many scholars note that the parable is fraught with a journey motif and that it is crucial to interpret everything within the section of Luke 9:51–19:27, including the parable, in light of a journey. Blythe (2024:8) says

any interpretation of the Good Samaritan must consider the broader literary context, namely, Luke's travel narrative to Jerusalem that takes place from Luke 9:51 to 19:27.

Though the journey motif is no doubt crucial in interpreting the parable, the theme of compassion for others engendered by one's love for God is paramount in the parable. And such a theme is suitable for the current purpose of directing the parable to ameliorate some social problems in the current time. As a matter of fact, Jesus' telling of the story was focused on imbibing the virtue of compassion to solve social problems. The parable is significant for its initial context because it identifies some social problems and proffers some plausible solutions to them. It showed people's different attitudes (those of the robbers, the priest and the Levite, the innkeeper, and the good Samaritan) in the matrix of social problems affecting other people around them. Such a profound approach is equally significant for contemporary socioeconomic problems in Africa.

Issues with Jesus' Parables

Parables are a hallmark of Jesus' teaching in the gospels; though he did not invent them, he made the most of them during his ministry in first-century Palestine. Remarkably, Jesus' parables have been of immense value to their audiences, from the first to the latest audience. The reputation and popularity of Jesus' parables are such that the English language possesses many expressions whose origins are from the parables (Stein 1994:33). Although all the evangelists recognised the significance of Jesus' parables and thus included them in their writings, Luke stands out as the most prominent, with no fewer than fifteen parables of Jesus not found in the other canonical gospels.

However, as significant as Jesus' parables are, their study over the centuries is not without controversy. One point of debate deals with interpreting Jesus' parables in the gospels. Scholars have considered Jesus' parables as allegories, metaphors, symbols, stories with a specific moral, stories reflecting a particular understanding of existence, and autonomous stories with aesthetic values (Hedrick 2005:10). Another issue is categorising Jesus' parables, as opinions differ among scholars on which specific parables fit into the riddle, example, and challenge types. The good Samaritan, for example, is considered an example parable by most scholars, but others, including Jahosky (2020:78), posit that it is also suitable as a challenge parable.

Likewise, questions arise about the alignment of the literary and the original contexts of the parables. For instance, because the good Samaritan parable is a complete unit and is capable of standing by itself and being meaningful without its literary setting, some interpreters doubt the literary context the author assigns it (Lewis 1985:94). Derrett (2005:210) claims that there is an unbridged gap between Jesus and his predominantly non-Jewish followers, despite the latter's faith and ingenuity, because they fail to recognise the nexus of the parables in existing Jewish biblical history. For instance, the good Samaritan parable draws upon existing stories of the young prophet from Jerusalem and the old prophet of Samaria (1 Kings 13:11–22) and the conscience-stricken 'Samaritans' in 2 Chronicles (28:8–15).

In the same way, Vrudny (2016:118) observes that

contemporary commentary on the parable is earnest in its attempt to challenge anti-Jewish readings that have dominated interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan for centuries.

Zitzer (2006:n.p.) accuses Christian scholars of advancing staged readings of the gospels by introducing the theme of shock where none exists. He contends that Christian interpreters distort the context of the good Samaritan parable to support their anti-Judaist stance by introducing a sense of shock, which neither Jesus nor the narrator intended. Thus, negative comments about gentiles were not peculiar to the Jews, and such comments do not mean a general hatred towards gentiles or Samaritans, as there were instances in the Talmud and Mishna where Jews showed respect towards them. While Zitzer's attempt to show that Jews recognised pious behaviour from gentiles is commendable, his claim that Christian scholars introduced the element of shock to Jesus' story is untenable. Particularly in the case of the good Samaritan, Jesus' audience would probably not have expected the Samaritan appearing on the scene to have done better than the priest and Levite before him. But, contrary to their expectation, the Samaritan acted extraordinarily with compassion, a gesture which evoked the element of shock in the audience. The same shock element is discernible in the lawyer's final response, an indirect mention of the Samaritan ('The one who showed mercy toward him', Luke 10:37).

Analysis of the Parable (Luke 10:25–37)

The Contexts of the Parable

The Lucan setting for the parable of the good Samaritan occurs as a transition from a secluded discourse by Jesus to his disciples after their mission to Israel's towns (10:1–24) to a question postured by a lawyer. The ensuing dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer centres around a love for God and a love for one's neighbour. Often, commentators suggest that the good Samaritan parable deals with love for one's neighbour (10:29–37), while the theme of love for God is addressed by the subsequent Martha and Mary narrative (Forbes 2000:55). But the parable's immediate literary context is the lawyer's question to Jesus about who is my neighbour after he had got an answer to the question of eternal life (Luke 10:25).

Nevertheless, the matter of context involves some debate as many scholars acknowledge that biblical narratives, especially parables, have multiple contexts which must be considered when analysing such texts. This standpoint is premised on the awareness that biblical writers seemed to have demonstrated some liberty in fixing some, if not all, narratives in their own literary contexts, other than the settings in which the stories were initially told. According to Stein (1994:55), four settings or contexts have been identified, namely: (1) the first setting in life, which is the situation in which Jesus told the story, (2) the situation of the early church during the oral transmission period of the story, (3) the situation of evangelists in which they communicated the story to their various Christian communities, (4) the post-biblical setting, which spans from the second century AD to the present. This scholarly postulation has given rise to the scholarly notion that biblical writers place stories in their literary contexts, different from the original settings in which Jesus told them. The fact that the canonical evangelists present different contexts for the same narratives/parables further supports this viewpoint.

However, this paper accepts the literary context as the context in which Jesus also told the story. Luke chapter 10 begins with the narrative of Jesus sending out 72 disciples with specific instructions in pairs to the cities and places he would later visit with the good news of the kingdom, the return of the disciples with joyous reports, and Jesus' further strengthening of the disciples (verses 1–24). Then the narrator reports that, after Jesus had appraised his disciples'

reports, a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. The narrator's introduction of the lawyer with the conjunction *kai* suggests that a crowd was present during the disciples' reports. Thus, the lawyer's testing of Jesus with the questions 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' and 'And who is my neighbour?' form the immediate context of the parable of the good Samaritan.

It is pertinent to note that the narrator closely links the lawyer to the parable by his consistent portrayal of the characters, νομικός τις, Ανθρωπός τις, ἱερεὺς τις, and Σαμαρίτη δέ τις (UBS GNT 4th Edition). Also, the lawyer contrasts the wounded man: while the lawyer 'stood up' (ἀνέστη) to test (ἐκπειράζων) Jesus and justify (δικαιῶσαι) himself, the wounded man fell (περιέπεσεν) among robbers and lay half-dead on the road. The lawyer is like the priest and the Levite, able to stand and justify or preserve their opinion and position, unlike the Samaritan whose standing is insignificant yet who rendered the needed help with the love and devotion envisaged by the law quoted by the lawyer. The narrator's description of the lawyer-Jesus engagement is interesting in that a certain νομός (lawyer) asks Jesus, 'What shall I do to inherit eternal life?' and Jesus replies to him with two questions: 'What is written in the law?' (νόμῳ) and 'How do you read it?' (πῶς ἀναγινώσκεις) (Luke 10:26). The questioning and counter-questioning indicate the lawyer and Jesus' familiarity with the halakhic method of their days. Jesus affirms that the lawyer's quotation from the law (Deuteronomy 6:5:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all
your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind

and Leviticus 19:18: 'love your neighbour as yourself') is correct. It is clear from the discussion between the lawyer and Jesus that eternal life is inextricably linked to the kingdom of God. As such, love for God and fellow humans must anchor the character of that kingdom. Here is a very significant point: breaking socioeconomic barriers in Africa requires compassion and the demonstration of love.

Regarding the lawyer's second question, the narrator mentions that it arises from self-justification. The lawyer, feeling righteous in his own right, asks Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' (Luke 10:29). The question is not misplaced considering that stipulated obligations require clarity of line and boundaries to

avoid crossing the lines and boundaries. Thus, a lawyer wanting to have clarification and the boundaries outlined so he could comply has not done any wrong. But Jesus refuses to give the boundary of whom a neighbour is or the category of neighbour to love. As explained, what Jesus does instead is

to define the category of neighbour, not in terms of the person-over-there but in terms of the lawyer himself. You are to be the neighbour to anyone, including people of a different religion or ethnic group. (Meier 1991:204)

Another point relating to the reasonability of the lawyer's question has to do with some ambiguity in interpreting the Old Testament command 'Love your neighbour', as evidenced in the rabbinic discussion of the early first century. The difficulty regards whether the term *rea*, neighbour, *reah* ('companion', 'fellow', 'kinsman', or 'friend'), in Leviticus 19:17–18 is broad enough to include non-Israelites. Many interpreters hold the viewpoint that the text focuses on fellow Israelites, suggesting that the Hebrew word translated as 'neighbour' does not usually apply to just any person because the focus was not on loving everyone (humanity) but on loyalty to one's own companions. Yet, other notable scholars, connecting verses 33–34 to the previous verses, 17–18, are persuaded that the term covers non-Israelites (Benovitz 2006:128–132).

The issue of interpreting the Leviticus command to love one's neighbour comes into focus again in Jesus' statement in Matthew 5:43, where he is reported to have said, 'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbours and hate your enemy"'. Tverberg (2012:60) argues that Christians' accusation that Pharisees were those teaching what Jesus quoted is erroneous because it occurs nowhere in rabbinic writings. But the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that it was the Essenes who gave the command to 'Love your neighbour' the spin of 'and hate your enemies' (Tverberg 2012:60). It is clear from the debate surrounding the interpretation of the command to love one's neighbour that there was some unresolved difficulty associated with it even up to the time of Jesus. It should be noted, however, that such difficulty was compounded by the lawyer's premeditated self-justification of his own viewpoint. The peril of self-righteousness, which prompted the lawyer's follow-up question of 'Who is my neighbour?' always prevents one from recognising and accepting one's

weaknesses, failures, and aspects that need improvement. The lawyer must have thought that Jesus would align with his tribal, parochial, and discriminative concept of neighbour. Disappointedly, Jesus' answer through the parable rejects the lawyer's perspective as flawed, retrogressive, and unhealthy.

It is apparent that Jesus' second question and what follows indicate that there were divergent interpretations of that law, and Jesus rejects the restricted perspective, which the lawyer most likely holds. Interpreters note the ongoing rabbinic discussions about the meaning of *neighbour* in the early first century. That probably explains the rationale for the lawyer's follow-up question.

The Jericho Road as the Geographical Setting of the Parable

The story's setting is the dangerous Jerusalem to Jericho road, the road well-known for its banditry and highway robbery in first-century Palestine. Jesus must have been familiar with the road through his journeys to Jerusalem from Galilee. Commentators over the centuries have consistently described the ancient Jerusalem-Jericho road as the 'Bloody Way' or the 'Bloody Pass' because robbers had wreaked great havoc on so many travellers along that highway (Miller 2011:57–61). Given the rugged and isolated terrain, travellers (especially individuals who journeyed alone) on this road were vulnerable to bandits who could exploit the plentiful hiding spots and escape routes into the desert, where pursuit would be futile. Jesus' listeners would have immediately recognised the peril implied in his statement about a man journeying from Jerusalem to Jericho (Corpora no date). The story's setting on a public highway with people from different social strata allows for exploring its message in contemporary African socioeconomic contexts.

Characters in the Parable

The parable has five characters: the robbers, the victim, the priest/Levite, the good Samaritan, and the innkeeper. Interpreters usually consider the robbers and the innkeeper minor characters, though they play significant roles in the social matrix of that story. As such, scholars do not pay much attention to them when interpreting the parable. It suffices here to stress that the robbers created a particular problem associated with other social issues of that environment at the time. At the same time, the innkeeper acted as a

professional providing treatment at a fee. The paper focuses on the three main characters: the victim, the priest/Levite, and the Samaritan, the story's hero.

A Certain Man: Going Down from Jerusalem to Jericho Falls Victim

The narrator says Jesus begins the parable by stating that a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, fell among robbers, and was stripped. They beat him and went away, leaving him half dead (Luke 10:30). The Jerusalem-Jericho highway was notoriously dangerous, infested with robbers who lurked around to prey on travellers who did not travel in caravans in those days. The status of the man who fell among robbers is unknown, and perhaps he was from the low stratum of society because there is no description of his person or occupation. Though in a terrible situation, he was lucky not to have died from the havoc inflicted on him by the robbers. This man represents the vulnerable people who barely live in Africa today because they are half dead by all indices of a good life.

A Certain Priest and a Levite: Highly Positioned but Falling below Expectations

The first character that appears on the scene after the damage to the victim is a significant figure in Jewish society, a priest who happens to belong to that echelon of the society. His appearance as the first was strategic, to hopefully solve the existing problem of a robbed, beaten, and unconscious victim. The reader/audience must have heaved a sigh of relief upon hearing that a priest was coming down that same road where the victim lay helpless. Though the half-dead man was in a terrible situation, struggling between life and death, his attackers, the robbers, left him a ray of hope by not dragging him into the field or ditch nearby but leaving him on the way where he would be conspicuous to the people passing by that road. So, when the priest appears, the hope of resuscitating the victim arises in the readers/audience. That the priest saw the man implies some quick assessment and decision whether to intervene. However, the priest's response suddenly dashed the initial hope because he chose not to give the man the required attention; instead, he left the side of the road where the victim lay, moved to the other side, and passed by.

The third character, a Levite, ranks below the priest and follows his example by passing by the wounded man on the Jerusalem-Jericho road. Scholars

suggest that the priest and Levite likely avoided helping the man for self-preservation, to prevent their defilement and temporary loss of office and its accompanying benefits. Arbuckle (2013:79) says the priest

refused to help for two reasons: he feared being attacked by bandits if he delayed, but more importantly, he was not prepared to be defiled by touching the victim.

Many interpreters think that it was most likely the priest and Levite shunned the wounded man to preserve their ritual purity. This is because the Old Testament law stipulates touching a dead body or blood makes a person unclean, a condition that would require a ritual restoration of cleanliness (Forbes 2000:63). Derrett (2005:216) argues that rabbinical interpretation techniques are necessary to get the parable's message. Countering the cowardice explanation he ascribes to Ethelbert Stauffer, he contends that the priest's action (or the alternative action he did not choose) could be justified since the ethics of the time gave no conclusive direction.

It must be stressed that the priest and the Levite's choice not to help a wounded fellow must have exacerbated the victim's condition in the mind of the audience. Such a failure is very huge because it comes from those who have powers and influence to easily make positive impacts in society. While it is not only the elite or the establishment that fail to mitigate poor socioeconomic conditions in Africa, theirs is of great impact because of the post they occupy. No doubt, the leaders are responsible for enhancing people's welfare and bringing development to society, but, instead of this, they abandon their responsibility and even worsen people's condition. Indeed, the priest and the Levite missed the opportunity to demonstrate the impact of God's anointing upon them on the half-dead man.

The priest and the Levite's preoccupation with their self-preservation exposes their lack of love and compassion for someone in serious need. The priest and Levite missed an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of their anointing from God on the injured man. It is worth noting that they could have also fallen victim to robbers on the same road, but they were fortunate not to. The narrator's mention of their shared path implies the potential risk they faced, highlighting their luck in avoiding danger on that occasion. The narrator's

expression that the priest and the Levite were going down the same road implicitly alludes to the possibility of their exposure to such risk. They could have fallen among robbers since they also travelled that road but were lucky not to be victims on this occasion. Or could it be that their privileged position also provided them with some extra layer of security as we see today in our contemporary society?

A Certain Samaritan: Rises to the Occasion and Becomes the Hero

It is interesting that a less 'significant' person, according to his ethno-religious identity, appeared when top members of society had already established a pattern of neglect for the victim (representing people experiencing difficulties in society). Then a certain Samaritan, less qualified to help, appeared on the scene. A Samaritan, though considered to be ethnically and religiously inferior by the Jews, would soon shock everyone, including those like the lawyer testing Jesus and claiming self-righteousness on account of his limiting perception and discrimination. Though the Samaritans claimed to worship the same God as the Judaeans, they believed Mount Gerizim in their land, not Jerusalem, was the chosen place for worship and sacrifice. During Jesus' time, the Samaritans were considered impure and despised by the Judaeans. They were also not supposed to be neighbours as the Jews excluded them from those they (Jews) would exercise the command 'love your neighbour' to. They treated Samaritans as their enemies (Lee 2015:142).

Biblical and extra-biblical sources affirm the mutual hostility between Jews and Samaritans and the problem subsisting in the time of Jesus. Extra-biblical literature is replete with Jews' disdain for the Samaritans as unclean and ungodly. Already, Luke places an event of Samaritan hostility against Jesus and his company of disciples in 9:51–56 to show this mutual distrust. Also, John's point of view, 'For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans' in the narrative about Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (4:4–26), alludes to the same problem. Jews and gentiles demonstrated their mutual hostility through vengeful actions, which saw Samaritans desecrating the Jerusalem temple one night during Passover, slaying many Galileans on their way to Jerusalem for a festival, and the Jews retaliating by attacking Samaritan villages (Chandler 2012:34).

The Samaritan's appearance in the story would not at first raise any hope of a better thing than what the priest and the Levite had done. So, it is safe to imagine that the immediate audience and the readers of the story (the Lucan communities) would expect a far worse scenario than what the earlier characters had done; the worst would be to assist the unconscious man to his complete death. In contrast, however, the Samaritan's actions introduced a twist to the story. The plot twist of the story lies in the actions of the Samaritan, as he shocks the audience (by his compassion and elaborate sacrifice and care for the wounded and dispossessed victim), including the lawyer testing Jesus and claiming self-righteousness on account of his limiting perception and discrimination. The hated Samaritan is thus the stock figure used in a radical reversal of expectation (Court 1997:54). The reversal of expectation lies in that the highly placed religious figures, expected to act as neighbours to the wounded man, fail in this regard.

Although the priest and Levite, and the Samaritan, are all portrayed as being on a journey, the description of the Samaritan suggests that his journey was somewhat different. The point is more striking if he was a businessman on a journey to sell the items (the oil and wine) he was carrying. But despite the constraints his journey demanded, he came to the man, and unlike the priest and the Levite (who saw him and felt no compassion), he felt compassion when he saw him and cared for him. The Samaritan's compassion was genuine as it led him to immediately render the first aid he knew best to the victim. Having stabilised the wounded man, he did not leave him in that dangerous zone but moved him to safety and robust treatment and care, which would ultimately restore his health and dignity.

It is very significant that he halted his journey because of a total stranger he did not afflict. He stayed overnight at the health facility in which he had put the wounded man to recover. Genuine love, compassion, and care for the well-being of others, especially those in poor socioeconomic conditions, are easy to discern. Leaders in Africa should note this and know that the socioeconomically less privileged or marginalised would always appreciate genuine efforts to alleviate their suffering. To sustain his efforts toward the full recovery of the wounded man, the Samaritan man, in addition to his initial care and generosity, provided money to the professional healthcare givers with a promise that he would return to pay whatever additional expenses accrued for

treating the patient. Jesus' listeners would have been astounded – and perhaps incensed – that Jesus told a story in which the hero turned out to be a Samaritan. This reaction would have contributed to the story's effectiveness. It is hard to forget. The despised and 'inferior' Samaritan becomes the true neighbour through compassionate actions.

The twist also extends to the conversation between Jesus and the lawyer. The scene begins with the lawyer standing to test Jesus and justify himself. In contrast, it ends with Jesus instructing the lawyer to go and do likewise what the Samaritan has done. Shocked and humbled by the Samaritan's actions, the lawyer could not deny the Samaritan's heroic acts but indirectly acknowledged him as 'the one who showed him mercy' without mentioning the Samaritan. As Arbuckle aptly remarks,

the dramatic paradox of the story, that would have shocked contemporary listeners, is that a Samaritan, one considered a religious heretic, a culturally and occupationally inferior person, spontaneously aided the dying man. (2013:80)

Jesus uses his ambiguous ethnicity to expand the definition of 'neighbour' beyond ethnic boundaries and emphasise the practical application of the law ('do this, and you will live', 10:28), which the Samaritan embodies by fulfilling the law through his actions, aligning with Jesus' teachings in Matthew 7:24–27 and Luke 6:46–49 (Chandler 2012:37).

Considering the Jews' disdain for the Samaritans, Jesus' choice of a Samaritan as the story's hero enhanced the surprise of the listeners and possibly angered a good number of them, because an unworthy and inferior individual replaces the priest and Levite who are among the symbols of their religious pride. Indeed, it would be impossible to forget this story (Deppe 2011:162). The Samaritan's compassion in the parable is remarkable, considering his potential constraints as a travelling businessman of wine and oil. Given his context, he was not in an ideal position to give the kindness he rendered. Yet against all odds, and unlike the priest and the Levite, he showed mercy and cared for the wounded man. The Samaritan provided immediate aid, moved the man to safety, and restored his health and dignity. His actions set a new paradigm for loving one's neighbour. The Samaritan's sacrifice and disregard for personal

concerns, such as defilement and potential danger, demonstrate his kindness and vulnerability. Despite their differences, he didn't expect anything from the injured man in return (Derrett 2005:217–219). His genuine love, compassion, and care for this victim in these poor socioeconomic conditions are evident. African leaders and followers would positively impact and transform their society if they understood that the less privileged or marginalised appreciate genuine efforts to alleviate their suffering.

Implications for Pressing Socioeconomic Problems in Africa

The good Samaritan parable has significant implications for addressing African socioeconomic challenges, particularly for Christians. It encourages a problem-solving attitude and presents a clear lesson about treating others compassionately, regardless of their background or social and economic status (SES). Thus, this paper affirms that the parable provides strong motivation to dismantle socioeconomic problems rather than to stand by and watch people drown in them. It implies that Africa would break many socioeconomic obstacles and achieve rapid progress when love and compassion were entrenched in its policies and programmes. It is also crucial for all, leaders and led, of all walks of life, to take the lead in imbibing the ethics of love and compassion in their general conduct, dealing with others, and championing the cause to inculcate the same in others.

Although many socioeconomic barriers are bedevilling the continent, the following critical area should begin to witness the application of compassion ethics. The paper posits that the fundamental problems lie in the selected sections, just like Jesus chose the Jericho highway to situate the problem.

Corruption and Bad Leadership

It is no exaggeration to say that many years of corruption and bad leadership have retarded economic growth and social development in many African nations. It is a disturbing reality that massive corruption cases are still being discovered in many African states. The parable shows that the Samaritan has a compassionate mind, which led him to make personal sacrifices of his belongings and business commodities, oil and wine, to save the life of a wounded stranger. He did not follow the path of the robbers nor that of the

ignoring priest and Levite. The point to emphasise is that if a man could use his resources to lift a stranger from a socially terrible condition, how much would he do if he were in charge of the commonwealth of the people for their welfare and development? Corruption exhibited in the forms of misappropriation of funds, lack of transparency, nepotism, and impunity undermine socioeconomic progress in many African states, also undermining the social fabric of these nations. Impunity has exacerbated corruption in Africa because many states' justice systems and governance structures do not uphold the rule of law. All these point to the absence of love and compassion. Africans must rally together to emplace solid leadership with integrity that will wean the continent from the forces and caprices of neocolonialism, which continues to aid corrupt leaders and exploit African resources. Also, there is a need for cultural reorientation and renewal to eliminate certain cultural practices promoting corruption in Africa.

Inadequate Infrastructure and Unemployment

Observers have rightly stressed that inadequate transportation, energy, irrigation, water/sanitation, and ICT (information and communications technology) infrastructure hinder economic growth and development in many African countries. In Nigeria for instance, energy is the most significant infrastructure challenge impeding industrialisation, which

has resulted in a shrinking industrial base. Once widespread industries such as textiles and shoe making have, for the most part, disappeared. (Radwan and Pellegrini 2010:2)

The Nigerian people currently face a dire economic situation as even several multinational industries have been exiting the country one after another. Martin Luther King Jr's remarks that emulating the good Samaritan entails the transformation of the whole Jericho road to keep the road safe and prevent men and women from falling victims as they journey on life's highway is apt (Gregory 2008:31). Today, in Africa, this would mean the provision of infrastructures that make living comfortable for all and enhance productivity to address poverty and wealth disparities. Massive infrastructure development is crucial in energy, transportation, irrigation, and information technology, creating job opportunities. As it is known, there is a nexus between inadequate

infrastructure and unemployment rates, particularly among African youth. Nigeria's unemployment rate rose to five per cent in the third quarter of 2023 (Aina and Olufemi 2024). Compassionate leaders are needed to prioritise creating employment opportunities for the youth.

Out-of-School Children

The large number of out-of-school children in Africa has become an albatross for its development.

Sub-Sahara Africa has the highest rates of education exclusion from the six developing world regions. Over one-fifth of primary-age children are out of school, and almost 60 per cent of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are not in school. (Klapper and Panchamia 2023)

Unfortunately, 'Nigeria accounts for 12.4 per cent of out-of-school children in Sub-Sahara Africa' (Okoro 2023). In Nigeria, for instance, many children of school age do not attend school because of parental neglect and the government's lack of political will to provide free and compulsory primary and secondary school education. Some of these children beg for food in restaurants and along major streets of the country, especially in the northern part. Others hawk while some others serve as domestic workers against their wishes. The pertinent question is: why are such children left in such terrible socioeconomic conditions? Nigeria's ability to create a demand-driven education system that focuses on lifelong learning will determine its capacity to embrace the benefits of the knowledge economy. To transition into a knowledge economy, Nigeria must improve the quality and applicability of education, particularly vocational training, and increase access to tertiary education to equip the youth to seize economic opportunities and actively contribute to the economy (Radwan and Pellegrini 2010:2).

Lack of Access to Quality Healthcare

Africa faces challenges to accessing quality healthcare due to inadequate infrastructure, insufficient funding, and ineffective healthcare systems. Many

of the population still lack access to quality healthcare, leading to inequalities, poor health outcomes, and reduced productivity.

About 672 million Africans, representing 48 per cent of the population, still lack access to the quality health care they need, WHO Regional Director for Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, has said. (Adebowale-Tambe 2023)

The good Samaritan parable has influenced Western healthcare principles and policies, emphasising quality care as a fundamental human right based on trust and relationships between providers and patients.

Just as the wounded Jew in the parable had a right to receive care from the Samaritan, everyone today has the right to healthcare. It is not a commodity to be bought only by those who can afford it. (Arbuckle 2013:76)

African leaders should adopt this ethos of compassion and welfare, reducing disparities in healthcare access. Investing in quality health infrastructure will reduce medical tourism and benefit the economy and well-being of African citizens. African leaders should aim to transform their nations into welfare states, providing social security for all citizens regardless of their status, religion, or tribe.

Poverty

Poverty in Africa is a significant socioeconomic issue which stems from factors like income inequality, limited services, and inadequate social safety nets. In 2024, around 429 million of Africa's 1.4 billion people lived under the extreme poverty of 2.15 USD per day, representing approximately one-third of the continent's population (Galal 2024). Nigeria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo had significant proportions of the world's impoverished population (Galal 2024). Tanzania, Mozambique, and Madagascar were also countries with high poverty levels (Galal 2024). The poverty rate in Nigeria has worsened, with a significant portion of the population slipping into multidimensional poverty bolstered by the country's highest inflation rate of 33 per cent in history. It is worrisome that the present government in Nigeria

has pandered to international lenders, leading to the removal of subsidies on energy and education while also increasing and widening tax nets. The subsidy removal has increased hardship, poverty, hunger, crime, disease, and death. These measures are without compassion. African governments and leaders must take responsibility for the economic prosperity of their people and nations. While Jesus acknowledged the existence of poverty in society, he emphasised the importance of helping those in need (evident in Matthew 26:6–13, Mark 14:1–9, and John 12:1–8) (Gates 2006:11–12). That emphasis of helping the poor is what contemporary African Christians should constantly demonstrate to alleviate the pervasive suffering across the continent.

Violent Ethnic Clashes

The parable captures the social problem of violence in all its ramifications. It is disturbing that many African states have achieved little or no integration among their several ethnic nationalities since their independence from the colonial powers. The 2022 Annual Review of Nigeria’s Violent Conflict Profile mentions that

Over 60,000 lives were lost to Nigeria’s security challenges in the last decade. Violent conflicts such as insurgency, banditry, farmer-herder disputes, gang wars and separatist agitations have continued to afflict the country. (Nextier 2023:12)

The parable counters tribalism and ethnic hostility, but violent clashes and civil wars persist in Africa due to factors like colonialism, unfair political dominance, historical hostility, and manipulation by African elites. African elites use political campaigns and speeches that exploit the existing ethnic and religious fault lines, thereby widening divisions, escalating tensions, and causing violence. In contrast, they disregard these divisions within their ranks. The death of Herbert Wigwe, former CEO of Access Bank Plc, reveals that ethnicity and religion are inconsequential among elites (Channels Television 2024). Yet they manipulate the masses using these factors. Therefore, the masses must embrace love and show ‘unexpected’ compassion like the Samaritan’s to achieve their desired transformation and prosperity.

Conclusion

This paper analysed the good Samaritan parable to argue that compassion is a potent tool that can help transform African socioeconomic problems. As exemplified in the paper's analysis, compassion can lead to actions that turn terrible situations around for good. As such, it is no exaggeration to say compassion, properly channelled, will foster genuine efforts to address different socioeconomic issues, which include inequities, poverty, ethnicity, social marginalisation, and exclusion in Africa. Every African must imbibe the virtue of compassion with a sense of community that transcends ethnic barriers to facilitate socioeconomic transformation. This attitude of compassion should also be integrated into governance in Africa with tangible programmes and projects in all sectors that will positively impact the people. This is why African governments should prioritise the welfare and empathic empowerment of their citizens. Religious leaders, particularly Christians, also need to champion the education of compassion at every forum at which they speak. The socioeconomic issues confronting Africa are surmountable. Situated in compassion, relevant solutions utilising local resources can transform the socioeconomic landscape of Africa. Countries in Africa have stayed long enough in the valley of severe socioeconomic issues, and now is the time to dismantle the difficulties.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis of this paper, the following recommended actions are needed:

1. Education (formal and informal) at every level in Africa should include compassion in its curriculum to ensure that the welfare of all people and the common good are achieved.
2. African governments should prioritise judicious use of national resources and common wealth for the welfare and prosperity of their citizens. They should design and implement welfare programmes that alleviate the suffering of the masses. They should place people's well-being over the globalist agenda that keeps impoverishing the masses in Africa.

3. The church in Africa should intensify efforts to provide solutions to socioeconomic problems through its social ministry. The church should also constantly persuade governments to make fair and compassionate policies and programmes that will improve the socioeconomic state of Africa.
4. Christians should be exemplary in demonstrating compassion, to bring solutions to the myriads of socioeconomic issues in Africa.

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Twumasi-Ankrah, CNK 2025, 'John Calvin's Biblicism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: a Constructive Retrieval for Theology, Ministry, and Social Witness', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 80-100

John Calvin's Biblicism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: a Constructive Retrieval for Theology, Ministry, and Social Witness

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Abstract

This article examines John Calvin's approach to the concept of the Trinity—that God is three-in-one while emphasising his insistence on a biblically grounded Trinitarian theology that resists speculation. The article will then argue that retrieving John Calvin's biblical Trinitarianism can furnish contemporary theologians with a constructive way forward for navigating the present malady of fragmentation between exegesis, doctrine, and public witness namely, that theology needs to be defined in terms of the economy of salvation found in scripture that in turn points to ethical and liturgical practice rooted in the relational justice of the Triune God. Calvin's Trinitarianism is both exegetically rich, solidly biblical, and attentive to the creedal and theological milieu of the early church. In its historical and theological context, this study employs the Historical Retrieval and Reappropriation method to do historical study on Calvin's Trinitarianism. By retrieving Calvin's biblical Trinitarianism, the article shows its continuing significance for today's theological reflection, not least as a constructive bridge between biblical studies and systematic theology, disciplines that are frequently treated in isolation from one another in more recent centuries.

Introduction

Contemporary theology is afflicted with a kind of methodological fragmentation in which biblical exegesis and systematic theology seem

sundered more than ever, if not completely torn apart. On one front, much of biblical studies prioritises historical-critical methods that approach Scripture mainly as an ancient text, to be unpacked through tools imported from linguistics, archaeology, and literary criticism. Although these approaches provide valuable historical perspectives, they abstract away the dogmatic and theological significance of Scripture; the doctrine is often untouched by the exegetical process (Osborne 2006:23). In contrast, systematic theology can build elaborate doctrinal constructs which, despite their sophistication, do not ground themselves deeply in the exegetical evidence of the biblical text (Vanhoozer 2005:15). This disjuncture initiates an erosion of theological coherence, leaving doctrines that fall into the pit of seeming abstract, speculative, as if floating above the lived realities of faith and practice.

This methodological gap has other implications for the church's public witness. If theology becomes disconnected from its organic basis in Scripture, the church can potentially root its ethical and social engagement in ideology or cultural fashions rather than the revealed character and purposes of God. The result is a theological vision that is unable to relate the central dynamic of divine self-revelation to the urgent social, ethical, and cultural concerns of contemporary communities in any meaningful way. But when divorced from biblical notions of the economy of salvation, theological reflection loses its scriptural authority and prophetic clarity.

This article aims to heal that fragmentation by retrieving John Calvin's biblicism—a hermeneutical posture that resists speculative theology by necessity and contends that doctrine must flow directly from the text of Scripture, understood to be the progressive history of God's salvific act. For Calvin, the Trinity is not an abstract philosophical determination, but a truth revealed in the biblical narrative itself, particularly in the economy of salvation as the actions of the Father, Son, and Spirit come together in a plan of redemption. Calvin's strong resistance to speculative metaphysics and his insistence on the primacy of biblical exegesis shaped his Trinitarian theology as a revealed mystery rather than a rational construct (Muller 2003:95). Because Calvin roots the doctrine of the Trinity in the exegesis of Scripture so deeply, however, he models an integrated theological method, in which exegesis and doctrinal development are not opposed disciplines but mutually enriching ones.

This study employs the historical retrieval and reappropriation methodology to reclaim and reappropriate Calvin's biblicism for today. Webster (2007:234) argues that theological retrieval is not mere antiquarianism but a conscious attempt to harvest theological wealth from a time gone by for the sake of enriching present theological imagination and the public witness of the church. This article considers Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity (in its historical, exegetical, and theological contexts) not merely to understand Calvin the historical character but as a constructive resource for contemporary theological reflection. A biblicism as implicit in Calvin offers not merely a bridge between exegesis and systematic theology, but a theological scaffolding affording the possibility of grounding the doctrinal and ethical reflection of the church in the triune identity of God as revealed in Scripture.

Calvin's Hermeneutical Context: Precritical Exegesis and Reformational Biblicism

John Calvin's biblicism emerges from his trajectory into the humanist exegetical stream, which aimed at the literal meaning of Scripture while keeping exegesis accountable to the received doctrine the rule of faith—the centre of its creedal and theological inheritance (Steinmetz 1994). In his work as a Reformer, Calvin walks a thin line between excessive speculative metaphysical theology represented by some medieval scholasticism on one side and the tendency towards uncontrolled allegorical interpretations in patristic and medieval exegesis on the other. To Calvin, Scripture was not an open canvas for creative theological imagination; Scripture was the school of the Holy Spirit, the divinely given text through which God reveals to us both Himself and His will (*Institutes*, 1.6.3).

This hermeneutical posture is much more than a method; it expresses a profound theological conviction on the part of Calvin that God can only be known as He makes Himself known. To this end, Calvin's doctrine of accommodation helps justify this approach by emphasising that the infinite, incomprehensible God condescends to finite human capacity to reveal Himself to us using human language, images, and historical action (*Institutes*, 1.13.1). Hence for Calvin, a faithful theology must conform to the contours of divine revelation itself so that doctrine arises directly from Scripture and not

speculative reasoning based on God's essence independent of his revealed works.

Calvin's hermeneutical methodology also reflects his understanding of the perspicuity of Scripture though certainly not of all of its passages—in that the central meaning of Scripture the knowledge of God and salvation is perspicuous enough to any careful reader guided by the Spirit (*Institutes*, 1.7.1). These above-mentioned convictions regarding the clarity of the Scripture and then, with it, Calvin's belief that Scripture is a coherent divine revelation, enable Calvin to work doctrine out of careful exegesis — tracing the whole counsel of God through the biblical canon. Exegesis and theology, in Calvin's eyes, are not distinct fields but rather they are two sides of the same coin, with theology serving exegesis in preserving the rule of faith and exegesis serving theology in continually rooting doctrinal reflection in the text itself (Steinmetz 1994).

This precritical yet methodologically rigorous framework enables Calvin to fashion a reformational biblicism that is both deeply exegetical and robustly theological. Instead of reducing theology to proof-texting, his method integrates biblical narrative, historical context, and doctrinal synthesis in a way that yields a Trinitarian theology that grows organically out of the economy of salvation as presented in Scripture. This hermeneutical endeavour determined a great deal about Reformed theology over the centuries, but affords, as well, a constructive model for contemporary theologians wishing to reconnect exegesis and doctrine after the dislocation wrought by modern critical methods.

Biblicism in Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity

In Book 1, Chapter 13 of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin grounds his doctrine of the Trinity not in abstract metaphysical speculation but in a close reading of the biblical economy of salvation. For Calvin, the sending of the Son into the world (John 3:16) is not just a historical event; it can tell us something eternal about the Son — that is, that the Son is the eternally begotten Son of the Father. So too, the mission of the Spirit in redemptive history (John 14:26) discloses the Spirit's eternal procession from the Father and the Son (*Institutes*, 1.13.25). This biblicism guards Calvin's trinitarian

doctrine from being held apart from the self-revelation of God found within the words of Scripture itself and speculation that comes ulterior to the biblical text.

This scriptural basis enables Calvin to combat two frequent theological mistakes. In the first, he rejects the separation of the economic and immanent Trinity thus the notion that God's actions in history (the economic Trinity) can be divorced from God's eternal creation (the immanent Trinity)—a theological heresy. Rather, Calvin holds, God's works in the history of life tell the truth about God's eternal self. This much, and indeed much more, can already be said: The economic roles of the Son and the Spirit also shed light on the eternal relations in the Godhead. This position would later shape the Reformed tradition's insistence that the economic Trinity reflects the immanent Trinity (Muller 2003:95).

Second, Calvin's biblicism avoids the opposite error. In this case, what may be called a functional unitarianism namely, the tendency to get lost in the details of what God does in history, which is found in some strands of biblicism, but which then never steps back to ask the deeper eternal question of who God is. Calvin argues that the Scripture's redemptive narrative reveals the triune God, and as such must proceed from the economy to the immanent life of God (*Institutes*, 1.13.21). Calvin asserts that, the doctrine of the Trinity does not get imposed from above onto Scripture; rather, it is the natural integration that emerges from the shape of the biblical story—a story where the Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit to effect redemption and lead the church into truth (John 14:26; 15:26).

Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism exemplifies his more general hermeneutical conviction that theology is nothing other than properly ordered exegesis of Scripture considering Christ. His Trinitarian doctrine does not, therefore, cleave biblical exegesis from dogmatic formulation, but keeps them in creative tension with one another, allowing exegesis to inform dogma and dogma to provide hermeneutical guidance in the task of faithfully interpreting Scripture. The movement of the interpretive energy of the tradition from Scripture to doctrine to hermeneutic framework is, to my mind, a healthy and necessary structure for theologians today who wish to retrieve a robust theological

reading of Scripture that is at once materially exegetically responsible and formally doctrinally grounded in tradition (Steinmetz 1994).

Calvin's Biblicism in Polemic Context: Rejecting Speculation and Anti-Trinitarianism

Calvin's commitment to biblicism did not develop in a theological vacuum; it was horned in the crucible of his polemics against anti-Trinitarianism, especially in his controversy with Michael Servetus. Because of his skepticism towards post-apostolic doctrinal developments, Servetus rejected both the eternal generation of the Son and the personal distinction within the Godhead, dismissing the doctrine of the Trinity as nothing more than an abstract, philosophical imposition upon the Scriptures (Steinmetz 1994:72-74). For Servetus, biblical language of Father, Son, and Spirit applied only to God's outward works and did not also refer to eternal relations in God's being.

Calvin's answer was a rich exercise in exegesis, polemics. In the first part of his *Defence of the Orthodox Faith against the Errors of Michael Servetus* (1554), Calvin maintains that the missions of the Son and Spirit in history reveal their eternal relations within the Godhead: the sending of the Son reveals his eternal generation, and the mission of the Spirit reveals his eternal procession (*Institutes*, 1.13.21). The basis for theological error, for Calvin, is speculation on the essence of God apart from the Scriptures whether through rationalist denial of the Trinity or scholastic metaphysical surplus (Muller 2003:96).

This polemical setting strengthened Calvin's biblicism as a theological bulwark. The binding of doctrinal reflection to the economy of salvation protected theology from two errors, then: (1) the speculative detachment of doctrine from biblical exegesis, and (2) the rationalist flattening of divine mystery into merely functional descriptions of God's work. Calvin insisted that God can be known only through His self-disclosure and that disclosure happens in the canonical Scriptures, in which the Father sends the Son and the Spirit in redemptive activity (*Institutes*, 1.6.3).

For Calvin, the immanent Trinity, that is the eternal relations within God, cannot be separated from the economic Trinity, the acts of God in redemptive history without losing the very shape of God who is (Webster 2007:237). This

biblicism kept the mystery of the Triune God grounded in the exegetical soil of Scripture. So, Calvin's way was not simply a hermeneutical option, but a dogmatic stance, forged in the heat of polemical battle, arguing for biblical and creedal faith over and against anti-Trinitarian revisionism.

Case Studies in Calvin's Commentary

John Calvin's devotion to biblicism, his unwillingness to clearly differentiate between doctrine and the narrative of Scripture receives its most clear articulation not in his Institutes but in his biblical commentaries, where his exegetical, doctrinal, and pastoral interests meet. According to Calvin, Scripture is not just a database of proof-texts to support pre-determined theological systems, but doctrine emerges organically from careful exegesis, governed by the rule of faith and read within the context of the unfolding story of redemption.

Calvin's commentaries must be taken together revealing a consistent hermeneutical posture, that is the handling of texts with historical sensitivity, canonical interpretation, and ultimately relation to the redemptive work of the triune God. Calvin's Trinitarian theology, therefore, is not some abstract theory that he imposes on the text but is born and grows organically within the economy of salvation as that brings itself to light through the biblical narrative.

The case studies that follow, of course, reflect this hermeneutical and doctrinal combination, coming from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. These examples show something of Calvin's confidence that Scripture itself instructs on the doctrine of the Trinity, not through speculative reasoning but through the decisive acts of the Father, Son, and Spirit in history. In every instance, Calvin's exegesis, doctrinal construction, and liturgical sensitivity coalesces into an integrated theological method, providing a constructive model of theology for today.

Case Study 1: Matthew 28:19 — The Triune Name in the Great Commission

A particularly clear display of Calvin's biblicism in action is found in his commentary on Matthew 28:19. In this text Jesus instructs the disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, a verse

commonly used as a proof-text for the doctrine of the Trinity. But Calvin very explicitly refuses to view this text in isolation as pure doctrinal evidence. Rather, he reads it in light of the revealed identity of God, sensing the Great Commission both as a command for the mission of the church, and as theological revelation regarding the nature of God as Trinity (*Comm.*, Matt. 28:19).

For Calvin, this trinitarian formula enshrined in the baptismal command reveals more than a doctrinal proposition; it discloses the very name and nature of the triune God. To be baptised into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to be inducted into the economy of grace, whereby the Father elects, the Son redeems, and the Spirit sanctifies. This robust, theological interpretation of Matthew 28:19 serves to exemplify Calvin's conviction about the connection between Scripture's witness to the triune God and the redemptive acts of God that are revealed in the very biblical narratives in question.

True to his biblicism, Calvin does not hyphenate exegesis, doctrine, and worship. For him, Matthew 28:19 is not just a theological text undergirding the Trinity, it is also a liturgical text that channels how the church baptises new believers. In Calvin's hermeneutic, doctrine and liturgy mutually support one another. Baptism is not an abstract religious ceremony; it is a Trinitarian act, a visible token of the believers' sharing in the life and grace of the triune God (*Comm.*, Matt. 28:19). This integrative reading, in which exegesis informs doctrine, which informs worship, which bears witness to the reality revealed in Scripture, points to the coherence at the heart of Calvin's theological method.

Moreover, Calvin's insistence against severing the Scriptural witness from dogmatic and liturgical interest sets a precedent for modern-day pleas for a theological reading of Scripture—one which means to engage biblical texts according to the faith of the church within the theological coherence of the canon (Steinmetz 1994). In this regard, Calvin's commentary on Matthew 28:19 serves as a case study in his biblically saturated Trinitarian theology rooted in the economy of salvation and organically tied to the worship and confession of God's people.

Case Study 2: Genesis 1:26 — “Let Us Make Man.”

In his *Commentary on Genesis*, Calvin views the well-known plural “Let us make man in our image” as not a rhetorical flourish or a colloquy between God and the angels but a direct indication of the Trinity. To Calvin, this soliloquy of God provides insight into the eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit, whose relationships were already being worked out and active in creation. This plural contrasts with re-examination of the plural through parallel Ancient Near Eastern or literary trope interpretations. Calvin does not simply lay out doctrine systematically; rather, he allows doctrine to flow directly from the text of Scripture itself, which highlights Calvin’s biblicism par excellence, allowing the internal logic and voice of the text to carry the day instead of philosophical or cultural paradigms from outside Scripture. In such an interpretation of Genesis 1:26, Calvin not only grounds his doctrine of the Trinity within the very fibre of creation but shows the ways in which God’s triune being shapes even the way humanity comes to be (*Comm.*, Gen. 1:26).

Calvin’s exegesis of Genesis 1:26 also reflects his more general theological conviction that the economy of God’s external works discloses the immanent life of the Triune God. The shared work of Father, Son, Spirit, in creation is not simply a division of labour or an exposition of numbers, but a revelation of the relationship of their ever having from the Godhead. For Calvin, this Trinitarian shape to the created order also has deep implications for the meaning of personhood. To be made in God’s image does not just mean rationality, creativity, or dominion over creation; it also means being made for relationship, community, and mutuality. As the Triune God shares in eternal communion, human beings made in that relational image are called to express that communion in how they relate to one another. Even in his doctrine of creation does Calvin’s Trinitarian biblicism knit exegesis, doctrine, and ethics together as an integrated, inseparable whole (*Comm.*, Gen. 1:26).

Such a focus on relationality, rooted in Calvin’s Trinitarian reading of Genesis, indicates the ethical and social implications of his theology. To be human is to be with and for others, following the eternal love and mutuality that is shared between Father, Son, and Spirit. For Calvin, your task is to reproduce the love of God in Christ by being God’s covenantal image-bearer, becoming people, whose truest operation lies with and for others; mission (as modelling how God loves) emerges through the human phenomenon. This Trinitarian

anthropology is in direct opposition to both the atomistic individualism and cultural isolationism that characterizes many modern conceptions of the self. Rather, it beckons human beings into lives of mutual service, hospitality, and communal care. In this regard, Calvin's doctrine of creation anticipates his expansive vision of an ethic in which the love that flows within the triune God is a key to human justice, compassion and the common good. By grounding these ethical imperatives in the very nature of God, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism does not allow for a divorce between theology and practice what God eternally is, humanity is called to embody temporally.

Case Study 3: Isaiah 63:9-10 — The Triune Redeemer of the OT

In his *Commentary on Isaiah*, Calvin proceeds to present a distinctly Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 63:9–10, a passage of God's redemptive action toward Israel containing both the Angel of His Presence and the Spirit of Holiness. Calvin recognises the Angel of His Presence as a theophany of the Son, Christ, who takes part in the redemption of Israel. Then, even while the Spirit grieves over Israel's rebellion, this avers the Spirit's personal investment in God's covenant relationship with His people. And for Calvin, this passage is more than a description of a historical event; he finds in it an incipient vision of the unity of the Godhead acting through different persons and functions within the context of the economy of salvation (*Comm.*, Isa. 63:9-10).

Calvin's understanding of this text articulates his more expansive theological claim that the Old Testament only makes sense in the light of the Trinity. To Calvin, the Triune God did not evolve over the course of redemptive history, as if the doctrine of the Trinity was solely a New Testament phenomenon. No, the Father, Son, and Spirit have always been actively engaged in creation, providence, and redemption so the Old Testament Israel meets with the Triune God, not some sort of generalised monotheistic deity. God's covenantal actions in history delivering, grieving, showing mercy are always the unified progress of the united work of Father, Son, and Spirit. This inner harmony between Old Testament revelation and Trinitarian doctrine bolsters Calvin's conviction that faithful exegesis, sound doctrinal formulation, and proper worship all function as checks upon one another in their concordant testimony to the same truth: that the one God, exists eternally in three persons.

This Trinitarian reading of Isaiah 63 also exemplifies Calvin's broader theological method, whereby exegesis becomes the seedbed for doctrinal and liturgical development. Calvin emphasised that reading Scripture theologically does not involve imposing a system of doctrine upon the text but rather understanding the text as disclosing the Triunity of God, when read canonically and covenantally. This is a hermeneutical commitment but also a pastoral one. Calvin was seeking to root Christian worship and piety in a fully Trinitarian concept of God by training the church to see Father, Son, and Spirit active across all of Scripture. So, for Calvin, an exegesis of the Old Testament is not only a matter of history, but also a matter of worship that involves teaching the church how to rightly understand and rightly worship the one God in three persons.

Case Study 4: John 1:1 — The Pre-Existent Word

Calvin's exegesis is there in Commentary on John where he cannot distinguish economic unveiling/exposure and ontic substance as he writes of John 1:1. The Word's action in creation and redemption reveals the eternal Son–Father relation. Calvin maintains that the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Word is not imported from the outside but rests upon biblical insider language: the Word was both with God and was God (*Comm.*, John 1:1). This reading functions at the level of doctrine and exegesis alike, all at once demonstrating that the doctrine of the Trinity does not rest, as it is often accused of doing, on proof-texts ripped from their context, but emerges from the fabric of the whole economy of salvation. To Calvin, the work of Scripture's inward and outward history in its unfolding revelation from creation to incarnation to redemption which proceeds from one divine source, mediated in historical difference by the Son and the Spirit, and disclosed in diverse form throughout the breadth of the canon.

It also highlights Calvin's belief that the authority of Scripture lies in its divine origin — God speaking himself. Calvin pinpoints out that, John 1:1 lays the groundwork for Trinitarian theology, not only because it presents the Word in a deifying sense (the Word was God) but because it does so in a relational one (the Word was with God). This double movement corresponds to the inner life of the Trinity: the Son is of one essence with the Father and yet eternally distinct as a Person. So, for Calvin, responsible exegesis needs to encompass both the economic and ontological implications of the text, so that the God

who speaks to, and acts in, history is the same God who eternally exists, in the Father, in the Son, and in the Spirit.

This Trinitarian reading of John 1:1 also mirrors Calvin's broader theological approach, in which exegesis leads directly to worship. For to confess the Word as both with God and God is not merely a dogmatic conclusion, but a liturgical and doxological necessity. Calvin is concerned not only to clear up what the text means but to instruct the church on how to confess aright the God that is encountered in the Gospel. Calvin asserted that, John 1:1 is the not abstract metaphysics, but root of Christian devotion, rooting all prayer and praise and proclamation in the reality of the Triune God revealed in the face of Christ. So, Calvin's treatment of this text is a model of his conviction that biblical interpretation, doctrinal formulation, and the life of worship must always move together, each deepening and guarding the others.

Case Study 5: Romans 8:11 — The Spirit and Resurrection

In his commentary on Romans 8:11, Calvin considers the Spirit's part in the resurrection of believers. According to Calvin, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is the exact same Spirit who dwells in believers, giving them a share of Christ's victory over death. Calvin situates this passage in the full sweep of redemptive history, as the Father raises the Son through the Spirit and the Spirit now applies that resurrection life to the church (*Comm.*, Rom. 8:11).

Here Calvin's biblicism, once again, resists fragmentation. Exegesis, doctrine, and hope coalesce into a Trinitarian eschatology. Resurrection is much more than a future event; it is the revelation of the power of the Triune God and the faithfulness of the covenant God. The church's hope, therefore, is not based on speculative end-times programs, but on the constant action of the Triune God—the same Spirit who brooded over creation (Gen. 1:2), who raised up Christ (Rom. 8:11), who indwells believers now (Rom. 8:15). Calvin's reading of Romans 8 therefore serves as a concrete example of his belief that Trinitarian doctrine grows organically in the soil of careful biblical exegesis, and not from philosophical imposition.

This resurrection as the third hypostasis sheds light also on Calvin's view of the Christian life in the now. For Calvin, the indwelling of the Spirit is not a static reality but rather a foretaste and guarantee of future glory. By no means are

the Spirit's present work in sanctification and spiritual renewal separate from the Spirit's future work in resurrection. In this way Calvin relates eschatology to ethics: those joined with Christ by the Spirit already share in the power of the age to come and are thus summoned to live as people marked by resurrection hope. This aspect is ethical, as the practical force of Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism about what God has done, is doing, what God will do in the triune economy forms not merely Christian belief but also Christian living.

Case Study 6: II Corinthians 13:14 — The Trinitarian Benediction

Calvin even interprets Paul's Trinitarian benediction— "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" both as liturgical and doctrinal confession in his Commentary on 2 Corinthians (*Comm.*, 2 Cor. 13:14). This blessing proclaimed over the church professes the saving nature of our triune God. What we see here is the inseparable operations of the Trinity: the Father's initiating love, the Son's redeeming grace, and the Spirit's unifying fellowship, Calvin observes.

According to Calvin, this text exemplifies his belief that doctrine should be in the church's worship. Theology is not an abstract intellectual pursuit but see the great theological revelations of Scripture as the springboard for our communal praise, blessing, and mission. What you find in the triune God of Scripture is the God who is present in worship, blessing the gathered community and sending them out into the world. This commentary illustrates an aspect of Calvin's biblicism that pushes against the modern fragmentation between exegesis, doctrine, and worship. To Calvin, the rhythmic forms of the church's liturgical life are themselves acts of theology, in that the triune God's name is confessed and encountered.

The proximity of worship and doctrine in Calvin's thought, moreover, underscores his pastoral concern for the spiritual health of the church. The church, Calvin said, does not simply study the Trinity rather it lives and prays within the reality of the Triune God. The benediction is not an exasperated theological appendix, but an ongoing time where the covenantal God, Father, Son, and Spirit, actually pours grace, love, and fellowship forth into the people of God. This exchange trains the church to understand all life in the light of *coram Deo* — living before the face of the Triune God. Hence, for Calvin, Trinitarian doctrine, biblical exegesis, and communal worship all merge into a

theological spirituality where knowing the Triune God is directly incorporated into worshiping and living in communion with Him.

Contemporary Theological Method: Fragmentation and Retrieval

An important characteristic of contemporary theology is methodological fragmentation, the severing of the ground relationship between biblical exegesis and doctrinal theology. Contemporary biblical scholarship often centres around the historical-critical approach, treating the Bible predominantly as a historical document to be analysed with philological, archaeological, and literary instruments. While this method has produced some worthwhile results in helping us understand the historical backgrounds of Scripture (i.e. history, socio-political structures, etc.), it has more often than not left biblical study free from the larger theological project, leaving dogma relevantly untouched from careful explanation of the biblical text that these doctrines are based on. Systematic theology, in contrast, tends to build doctrinal systems employing inherited theological categories, but often minimally engaging with the actual movement of the biblical narrative (Vanhoozer 2015:56). This methodological fracturing might have helped give rise to two unfortunate realities: theology without biblical studies and biblical studies without theology.

This fragmentation is not merely an academic inconvenience but rather threatens the very coherence of theological reflection. Exegesis is separated from doctrine and a chasm exists between the academy and the church, with the biblical scholar considered to be a historian of ancient texts (given that these texts are dead), and the theologian a speculative system builder working from ideas inherited rather than being rooted in the living Word of God. This disconnect undermines not only good theological coherence but also the church's preaching, worship and ecclesial formation, because the doctrinal content of the faith becomes adrift from the story and authority of Scripture.

In contrast to this backdrop, retrieval theology has surfaced as an important modern movement seeking to recover pre-modern theological methodologies (especially those that synthesise exegesis and doctrine in a mutually enriching relationship). Perhaps especially helpful for such retrieval is John Calvin's

biblicism. In Calvin's view, exegesis and doctrine are not competitors; they are deeply interwoven, such that doctrine flows from faithful exegesis and envisions the church's ongoing work of interpreting Scripture. Indeed, his Trinitarian theology does not impose a metaphysical framework onto Scripture but is drawn directly from the biblical economy of salvation evidenced in the missions of the Son and Spirit. This return to Calvin's method of hermeneutics and doctrine holds great potential, not only for the sake of theological consistency, but also for the reformation of preaching, worship, and ecclesial formation, for which the connection between the unity of Scripture, doctrine, and spiritual formation is key to the lifeblood of the church.

Retrieval, however, is different from romanticising the past or trying to recreate a premodern world. Rather than picking and choosing elements of an old ecclesial witness for modern consumption, retrieval theology, especially when pursuing historic retrieval guided by the historical retrieval and reappropriation method, aims to retrieve historic theological wisdom and reappropriate it for contemporary contexts and questions (Webster 2007:231). In this regard, Calvin's biblicism provides not merely a historical model, but a theological resource for how to address modern fragmentation by demonstrating how doctrine and exegesis, theology and worship, text and tradition can and must work together in a unified theological method.

The Triune God and Public Witness: a Social Implication of Calvin's Biblicism

Retrieving Calvin's biblicism does more than supply a theological method; it has important ethical and social implications as well. For Calvin, knowledge of God is never simply an intellectual exercise—true knowledge of the triune God must impact how believers live in community and relate with one another (*Institutes*, 3.7.6). Such a conviction depends, then, on Calvin having understood God's self-revelation as relational and covenantal. The triune God is not only sovereign Creator but covenant-keeping Redeemer, who's relational sending thus the Father sending the Son, and the Spirit sets the very pattern for covenantal faithfulness in human life. In this way, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism does not merely give theological coherence; it supplies the moral grammar for the church's public witness.

This interrelationships between theology and ethics are woven into the very fabric of the biblical narrative. In fact, throughout Scripture, God's redemptive actions are always actions of justice for the oppressed and vulnerable. God sets free enslaved Israel (Exod. 6:6), commands concern for the widow, orphan, and alien (Exod. 22:21-23), and condemns nations because they have done violence to the poor (Isa. 1:17). These are, however, not isolated ethical imperatives—they are an expression of God's own character as the covenantal Lord who acts throughout history to ensure justice followed by mercy. This economic action of God which is disclosed in redemptive history is for Calvin itself a moral paradigm for the life of the covenant community. The God who sends a Son and a Spirit into the world to accomplish salvation sends the church into public life to reflect his justice and mercy (*Institutes*, 2.8.54).

This unbreakable link between theology and ethics can read as a challenge to certain modern theological currents. On the progressive side, some movements within the theological tradition call for justice but diminish or reject the authority of doctrinal revelation. Justice is interpreted almost exclusively sociologically, politically or ideologically, apart from the character of God revealed in Scripture (which informs our understanding of justice). On the conservative side, doctrinal correctness is often treated as an end, and the church's responsibility for structural justice is downplayed or neglected altogether. Calvin's biblicism provides an essential corrective to both errors. Because Calvin grounds both doctrine and ethics in the revealed nature of the Triune God, his approach mandates public witness as a necessary component of faithfulness in Christian theology. Justice is not a negotiable political issue, but a revealed theological reality that flows from knowing and worshiping the triune God as he is in Scripture (Boesak 2017:38).

This makes Calvin's biblicism a basis for an integrated public theology, one that concedes no fracture between doctrine and practice and understands the Trinitarian doctrine itself to be the constitutive character of the church's ethical imagination. The God who lives eternally in relational love and justice sends His people forth to reflect that same relational justice in the world. For Calvin, any retrieval of the past that stops at mere intellectual recovery rather than ethical reformation will fall short. The witness of the church (both in word and deed) must flow from its confession of the triune God, whose acts in

redemptive history repeatedly define the church's describing of justice, mercy, and faithfulness in society.

Calvin's emphasis on a shared identity is in keeping with much of African theology that tends to lend itself to relational ontology. As shown in African theologians like Mbiti (1990:106) and Bediako (1992:210), African worldviews are inherently corporate and social in nature, being consistent with the perichoretic communal nature of the Trinity, where Father, Son, and Spirit, manifest eternal communion together. Such a Trinitarian foundation gives theological justification to engage the puzzles of justice, reconciliation, and corporate restoration in African communities. Given that the concept of community is of immense significance of African societies (Boaheng 2021:78), it is vital to explore the specific context of African societies, it is worth considering the implications of the Trinity for public witness. As such, the doctrine of the Trinity, where diversity is tempered with unity, offers a powerful theological lens through which to formulate communitarian networks in Africa (Boaheng 2021:78). This Trinitarian conception pushes against individualisms that break down community and the valuing of difference as strength. Numerous African theologians now see the necessity for the church to speak to the social and political issues on the continent (Eze 1997). This entails moving away from an individualistic notion of faith toward a more communal, socially engaged understanding. The call to public witness, which is based on a Trinitarian model of God needs to be applied in a context that addresses the realities of African societies. It is thus not surprising that African theological education has historically failed to respond adequately to the pressing challenges facing the African masses — poverty, oppression, etc. (Amanze 2009). A pertinent public theology must intentionally address these struggles and concretely assess its theological merits regarding justice and liberation (Golo 2018). Mutua (2011) proposes a holistic transitional justice perspective for Africa focusing on "community wholesomeness" as a pathway towards societal healing and balance. The ideal of Ubuntu, which prioritises interconnectedness and communal well-being, offers an important ethical framework for this engagement. Cherishing a communal worldview as articulated in the Trinity and the Ubuntu principle among Christians will bring about the formation of peaceful societies comprising individuals who are dissimilar yet capable of co-existing, thereby combatting the issues of ethnocentrism and tribalism that have long afflicted the continent. The Ubuntu

philosophy was founded to combat the apartheid regime in South Africa (Msugther et al. 2023). Moreover, through postcolonial articulations of the Triune God not as a colonising doctrine, but as a decolonising doctrine (Verhoef 2021), African theologians can equip the church to return to its roots as a force for good, seeking justice for the oppressed and affected by injustices faced by the city.

Conclusion

Retrieving Calvin's biblicism is not just an academic enterprise of systematic theologians—it is a summons to theological reformation for the whole church. The schism between exegesis, doctrine, and public witness is a disaster not of temporary inconvenience but one that undermines the very coherence of the church's faith, worship, and mission. When exegesis shrinks into historical reconstruction, doctrine is speculative theory, and public theology drifts untethered from God's self-revelation, then the church loses its theological centre of gravity.

The way forward is provided in Calvin's biblicism. This is because Calvin posits that doctrine flows organically from Scripture, and that Scripture itself tells the story of the Triune God's economy of salvation. He provides the church with a unified theological epistemology; one in which exegesis, doctrine, worship, and justice are part of a single theological task. This integrative approach invites biblical scholars to read alongside the church, systematic theologians to think alongside biblical text, pastors to preach alongside theological depth, and the entire body of Christ to worship alongside theological precision.

But in the end Calvin's biblicism confronts the church to recover her Trinitarian identity — a people baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit (Matt 28:19), a people called to bear witness in the world of the Triune God's justice and mercy. In the fragmented and polarised age, in which theology often pendulates between rootless activism on the one side and barren dogmatism on the other, Calvin's biblicism provides the church a means to think deeply, worship faithfully, and act justly all from the coherent centre of the Triune God's self-revelation in Scripture. More so, Calvin's Trinitarian biblicism offers a way to research justice, reconciliation, and public witness within African societies where communal identity and social responsibility are vitally

important. The analytical hermeneutics employed by the doctrine of the Trinity makes it clear that ethnically and politically divided societies require similar social cohesion. Focusing on relationality and mutual responsibility, Calvin's theological vision contributes to African ethical traditions that emphasise the good of the community and the need for justice on behalf of the marginalised.

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Boaheng, I 2025, 'An African Christian Reflection on the Metaphorisation of the Church as Body, Ministry, and Social Witness', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 101-120

An African Christian Reflection on the Metaphorisation of the Church as Body

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Abstract

New Testament writers picture the relationship between Christ and his church as well as the relationship among the members of the church using such metaphors as a community of citizens, the body of Christ, a household, a building, a bride, and a temple. A proper understanding of these and other ecclesiological metaphors is required to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. Yet not much theological attention is given to these metaphors in contemporary African theological discourses. This research was, therefore, conducted to examine the body metaphor from an African socio-cultural and religious perspective to enhance the African understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the Christian church. The researcher used a literature-based research methodology to gather data from the library and internet. A contextual theological framework was used to analyse the data, focusing on understanding the subject matter within the African socio-political and cultural context. After a brief outline of the concept of the church, the paper examines each of the selected metaphors of the church in relation to the African worldview and finally offers implications (reflections) for Christian discipleship. The paper found that the African worldview better prepares African believers to appreciate the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. It, however, also noted some limitations of the African socio-political structure that need to be dealt with in order to make the metaphors as meaningful as they are intended to be. In addition to its contribution to African Christian

ecclesiological discourse, the paper attempts to decolonise Christianity and make it both meaningful and relevant to the African society.

Introduction

Since the inauguration of the Christian church, its nature, purpose, and operations have been subject to various interpretations across different cultures. Different New Testament writers have used different metaphors for the church, each contributing to a holistic understanding of the nature, purpose, and operations of the church. In this context, a metaphor refers to a term or phrase that is used to describe something that it is not literally fit for. N. Dobrić (quoted in Wessels 2014:714) argues that ‘metaphorical concepts represent interwoven basic structures of human thought, social communication and concrete linguistic manifestation through a rich semantic system based on the human physical, cognitive and cultural experience’. The New Testament authors use various metaphors to illustrate the relationship between Christ and the church, as well as the dynamics among believers. These include such images as a community (such as God’s people, a heavenly citizenship, and God’s kingdom), a family (like the household of God or a bride), a body (the body of Christ), a building (God’s temple), and a field (plants, a vineyard, or a vine).

A clear understanding of ecclesiological metaphors is essential for deepening African insights into the church’s identity, mission, and functions. This is because these metaphors have parallels in the African worldview that make it easier for Africans to appreciate them. Nonetheless, contemporary African theological discourses have not given sufficient attention to the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe the church, particularly the body metaphor. This gap in theological inquiry has hindered a holistic appreciation of the church’s identity and function in African Christianity. The primary problem this study addresses is the lack of theological engagement with ecclesiological metaphors, especially the body metaphor, within African theological discourse. This study is justified by the need to bridge this theological gap and provide an Africa-centred interpretation of the church as the body of Christ. Over the years, Western approaches to the study of the metaphors have dominated African theological discourse. It will be argued that a proper understanding of these metaphors through an African socio-political

and cultural lens can deepen African Christians' appreciation of their identity and role within the church. That is, exploring these metaphors within the African worldview would ensure that theological concepts resonate with indigenous cultural frameworks, making Christianity more meaningful and contextually relevant. The article adopts a literature-research approach whereby data was collected from existing publications. To address the research problem the article adopts a contextual theological approach. This framework may be defined as

the strategic adaptation of theological doctrines and practices to specific cultural *milieus* whilst emphasising the primacy of the gospel over cultural norms. (Boaheng 2024:212)

This theological model is guided by the following principles: adequate understanding of contextual realities, the importance of maintaining the core of the Christian message, the need to be cautious of syncretism and folk religion, the need to be cautious not to mistake shadows for the reality of the gospel, and the need to connect one's contextual theology to a global theological framework (Boaheng 2024:213–221).

Understanding the Concept of the Church

The English word *church* comes from the Greek word *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) which means 'the assembly of called out ones' (Williams 1996:15). In the Septuagint, *ἐκκλησία* translates the Hebrew קהל (*qahal*) which means 'an assembly' (Ryrie 1999:455). In the Graeco-Roman world the word *ἐκκλησία* was used in the political sphere in reference to 'the gathering of the citizens of a city' (Erickson 1998:1041; see also Acts 19:32, 39, 41; Williams 1996:455). It is like an African society calling its members through the gongon beater to assembly at a particular place.¹ After the establishment of the New Testament faith community, the believers of Christ became known as the *ἐκκλησία*. The New Testament *ἐκκλησία* comprises people who accepted the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ as the means of salvation, had expressed faith in Christ as their saviour, and had confessed their sin for forgiveness of sin amidst repentance. The members of the church had been removed 'from the dark situation of sin

¹ The gongon is a type of drum that is played to summon citizens of a society.

and evil' (Williams 1996:17). The New Testament group of believers were first referred to as the 'ἐκκλησία' in Acts 11:26. The description of Jesus' disciples as the 'ἐκκλησία' meant that the members of the early church identified themselves both as citizens of the city of God and as people who stood in continuity with the Old Testament community of God's people.

The Body Metaphor

One of the most frequently used and the most vivid representations of the church is the expression 'the body of Christ' (Dunn 1998:548; Schreiner 2001:335). This metaphor is particularly significant because of how frequently it is used, the different ways it is used and developed, and how significant it is theologically. With no Old Testament root, a number of sources have been put forth for the body metaphor. One school of thought considers Jesus' assertion that the persecution of the church amounts to persecuting Jesus himself (see Acts 9:4–5) as the source of this metaphor (Schreiner 2001:549). Other possible sources include Paul's own Adamic Christology, Paul's 'in Christ' theology, corporate personality, or sacramental theology (Dunn 1998:549; Schreiner 2001:335). The symbolisation of the city as body in Paul's Graeco-Roman context might have also influenced his thought. Seneca, an ancient writer, uses the body metaphor in a similar way to that found in Pauline literature. Seneca uses the body metaphor to denote the divine-human unity (cf. Colossians 1:15–20, Ephesians 1:22–23, 5:23, 5:30), the unity of the constituents of human society (cf. Romans 12:4–5, 1 Corinthians 12:12–27, Ephesians 2:16, 3:6, 4:4, 4:25), and the relationship between the state as 'body' and the emperor as 'head' (cf. Colossians 1:18, 2:19, Ephesians 1:22–23, 4:1–16, 5:23) (McVay 2006:292). No matter one's position, the source of the body imagery is not as important as the theological message it carries.

Paul uses the body metaphor both for the universal church (Ephesians 1:22–23) and the local church (1 Corinthians 12:27) (Erickson 1998:1047). The body imagery underscores the link between the church as a group of believers and Christ as the head of the church. It underscores that one's salvation unites the person with Christ; hence believers are 'in Christ' or 'with Christ' (Erickson 1998:1047). For Paul, Christ's presence in the believer is the foundation upon which one believes and hopes for the glory that lies ahead (Colossians 1:27, Galatians 2:20). Christ is actually the source, the agent, and the owner of all

things that were created (Colossians 1:16) and the head of this body of which believers are individual parts (Colossians 1:18). Being united with Christ, the believer derives nourishment through him to whom he/she is connected (Colossians 2:19). The connection between the believer and Christ is reminiscent of Christ's vine metaphor which depicts him as the vine and believers as branches connected to him (John 15:1–8). The body imagery further underscores that the church is the locus of Christ's present activities just as his physical body was the locus of his activities during his first advent (Erickson 1998:1047).

Aspects of the Body Metaphor

The Headship of Christ

First of all, the headship of Christ in his body signifies his authority over the church (Ephesians 1:22–23, Colossians 1:18) (Enns 2008:361; Very 2019:386). It means that he is the leader and the lord of the church, directing and superintending the affairs of the church. Therefore, ministers in leadership positions in the church must consider themselves as representatives of Christ. Ecclesiological leadership must be practised in accordance with Christ's will and directives. The church cannot exist apart from Christ (Williams 1996:66). Without the head (Christ) the church is simply dead (a corpse). In the African environment, people frequently encounter snakes on their farms. Since snakes are venomous one has to avoid them and/or kill them when one encounters them. There is an African proverb that says, 'When the head of the snake is cut, what is left is a robe', meaning the snake becomes powerless when its head is cut off. So people will encourage others to cut off the head of a snake if they really want to make sure that they (the people) are safe. Just as the snake has no life without its head, so the church becomes lifeless outside Christ. The headship of Christ with respect to the church, therefore, underlines that the entire life of the church 'is virtually connected with Christ' (Williams 1996:66).

There is another saying: 'when a carcass rots, it begins from the head'. The meaning is that the quality of the body depends on the quality of the head. In other words, the body cannot be bad if the head is not bad. Relating this to the church, the quality of the church depends on the quality of its head. Since Christ, who is the head of the church, is perfect and sinless, the church must be holy. The church must reflect Christ's righteousness to the world that loves

unrighteousness. At the same time, the point can be made that the quality of the church may be affected by the human leaders put in charge of its affairs. Instead of learning from Christ, some believers erroneously imitate their leaders as was the case in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 3:1–4). The failure of the leader, therefore, affects the church greatly. It is therefore important to be cautious and prayerful when choosing leaders for the church.

Unity and Interconnectedness

The body metaphor also implies unity, interconnectivity, and interdependence between members of the church (Enns 2008:361; Erickson 1998:1047; Williams 1996:68). In this sense, unity means the formation of an organic whole that is marked by agreement and internal cohesiveness. The unity of believers is rooted in their common foundation of faith and practice. The unity that exists between the individual members of the church is unity in spirit, which transcends merely natural ties, whether family, nation, or race.

In the Old Testament, Israel was divided into different tribes and later into different kingdoms despite their common ancestry (from Abraham). Their unity was not necessarily based on their common ancestry but on their relationship with a common God, Yahweh, and with their families. Similarly, in most traditional African societies, unity among people depends mainly on their common object of worship, common linguistic tradition, common geographical location, and family ties. This unity is not effective because it does not accommodate people of different backgrounds, including people of different languages, different tribes, and different geographical areas, among others. Generally speaking, the possession of a human soul by everyone, as a spark from God, serves as a unifier for all humanity. However, even in Africa where people are generous and hospitable and easily share their resources with others, it is not easy to unite with ‘outsiders’. Therefore, like ancient Israel, unity in Africa is practically limited to a nation or a closely knit community.

But in the New Testament the unity among Christians has no limit, knows no boundary (Kosse 2006:1314). The inward unity of the members of the church cannot be expressed by any outward relationships. The oneness of the believers is patterned after the oneness between the Father and the Son (John 17:21). Just as the Holy Spirit is the bond of union in the Godhead, so he is the

source of the unity in the church. Paul illustrates this spiritual union in at least the following four ways.

The first is the filial unity that is based on origin or parentage. Here, Christ is said to be the 'firstborn among many brothers and sisters' (Romans 8:29, NIV used throughout). It must be noted that Christ is not begotten in the way that believers are begotten; he is the only begotten son of the Father; believers are made in his likeness. In 1 Corinthians 3:1–12, Paul laments that the Corinthian believers had developed factions such that they were living in unity no more. He tells them that he (Paul), Cephas, and Apollos are all fellow workers working for Christ and Christ alone is the head of the church. He, therefore, asks the church if it were any of these church leaders who was crucified for humanity. He makes the point that the crucified Christ is one, not divided, and for that matter his followers are not expected to be divided but to be united in mind, purpose, and whatever they do. The unity that is expected to be among members of the church is also shown in Ephesians 4:4–6.

The second symbol of unity is the conjugal union (Ephesians 5) based on the institution of marriage. Marriage is a divine institution that binds two people of different backgrounds together in a covenantal relationship that is expected to be broken only through the death of one of the partners. The strength of the marriage bond is underlined by the use of the word 'cleave' in relation to the man's attachment to his wife (Genesis 2:24). Such a bond is never to be broken by any human being (Matthew 19:6). This is the kind of bond that unites the members in the body of Christ. The closeness of this union, its fruitfulness, indissolubility, and complete interchange of goods, is significant for a holistic understanding of the ecclesiological unity.

The third aspect of the unity is the sacramental unity (1 Corinthians 10:16–17) (Enns 2008:548). Sharing the cup signifies sharing in the benefits of the atoning blood, and sharing the loaf sharing in the benefits of Christ's substitutionary atoning death on the cross (1 Corinthians 10:16). Paul establishes an analogy between the sharing of the one loaf at communion and the unity of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17). All believers are united in feeding on the crucified and resurrected lord.

Fourth is the organic unity existing between the head and the body. Paul gives this unity a trinitarian dimension – one body, one spirit, one hope, one lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all (as an empowering spirit) and through all (as a gift-bestowing spirit) and in all (as a life-giving spirit) (Ephesians 4:4–6). The trinitarian God is social/relational in nature and so humankind, being made in God’s image, is also social in nature. The formation of societies due to the social nature of humankind means human beings live in communities of people of diverse background. Yet, the community is a united body, a body that thrives on unity in diversity, a situation that is similar to the unity that exists among the distinct personalities of the triune God.

Even though one’s qualification into the church is an individualistic affair (involving a personal salvation experience), the members of the church are interconnected. Therefore, when divisions over spiritual gifts were creating problems in the Corinthian church (1 Corinthians 12–14), Paul provided a solution that emphasised the unity in diversity of the body of Christ (Schreiner 2001:367). He established that God has intentionally given believers diverse gifts for the wellbeing of the church. Believers are many parts of the same body, each part playing a different role (Romans 12:4). The interconnectivity becomes clear in the assertion that Christians in Christ ‘though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others’ (Romans 12:5). Therefore, if one refuses to function, the entire church will suffer, meaning the various parts are equally important. Paul develops the idea of the equality of the various body parts by arguing that, whether he/she is a Jew or a Gentile, every believer has been baptised by the same Spirit into the same body and, for that matter, they have all drunk one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). He argues further that even some gifts are more conspicuous than others; none of the gifts is more important than any other (1 Corinthians 12:14–25). Paul urges the Colossae Christians to let the peace of Christ dominate their corporate life, having been called to such a harmony as Christ’s body (Colossians 3:15) (Schreiner 2001:338). He also emphasises the unity between Jews and Gentiles as members of the Christian community, having been reconciled with each other and with God through Christ’s work on the cross (Ephesians 2:11–3:13) (Schreiner 2001:1047; Very 2019:385). Before Christ’s death, there existed a division between Jews and Gentiles, but now there is reconciliation and unity symbolised by the image of the body. As Kuzuli Kosse puts it

By his death and resurrection, Jesus opened the way to new alliances for all people, who had formerly been without grace and were enemies of God (Eph. 2:12-13). (2006:1314)

Mutual Edification

The organic nature of the church implies growth to maturity (Ephesians 4:12–16) (Very 2019:386). Just as every organism grows to maturity, so the church is expected to grow toward maturity. Spiritual gifts have been given to enhance the maturity of the community so that it (the community) can function well like a fully grown man (Enns 2008:361; Very 2019:386). Lilly Nortjé-Meyer translates Ephesians 4:13 as follows:

Everybody should come unto a perfect man, unto the dimensions of the full stature of Christ. The tenor in this case is not the church, but Christ, the full stature of Christ. (2005:735)

Here, there are no defects in any area of the body; each component is perfectly formed and performs its intended function excellently. Nortjé-Meyer (2005:735) notes that in the Graeco-Roman world the male body was considered the norm while the female body was defective. Paul's use of the male figure 'to describe the leader, ruler and decision-maker' of the church is, therefore, consonant with the Graeco-Roman public and socio-political values (Very 2019:387). Women's roles in the households of the in-group were similar in both Graeco-Roman and Ephesian culture, and Ephesian women held no leadership positions in the church (Very 2019:387).

In the body of Christ, everybody matters because every believer has a specific role to play for the common good of the church (1 Corinthians 12:7, 1 Peter 4:10) (Erickson 1998:1047; Williams 1996:68). Paul's teachings about diverse gifts and different but equally important body parts functioning together in a single organism underline the unity of the members of the body (1 Corinthians 12:12–25). The body metaphor, therefore, depicts the church as a close-knit community that exists for the good of all of its members. One must actively participate in the body of Christ not only because each member depends on the others but also because each member has a duty to care for the other members (Williams 1996:70). This fact further underlines the need to

participate in the activities of a local church in which one edifies others and also benefits from other members.

Since no one has all the gifts (1 Corinthians 12:27–31), each person should exercise what they have been given (Romans 12:6) so that the church will lack nothing in respect of these gifts (Williams 1996:70). Given that no one has it all, members of the body of Christ are expected to bear one another's burdens so that, together, the whole church can be presented as a purified whole (Galatians 6:2). To this end, those who are found to be in sin are to be restored (Galatians 6:1). Paul's approach to dealing with sinful members varies. In some cases in Galatians 6, sinful members were to be restored gently. In some other cases, he requires the church to excommunicate sinful members from the fellowship so that they will not defile it.

With the above exposition on the body metaphor, the paper proceeds to deduce some implications for African Christianity in terms of theology and praxis.

Theological and Pastoral Implications (Reflections)

The body metaphor has implications that can be noted and outlined.

The Communal Nature of the Church

The body metaphor outlined above highlights the communal nature of the church. People enter the church individually, but the church as a whole is a community. The ecclesiastical community comprises the church triumphant (dead believers), the church militant (living believers), and the church expectant (yet-to-become believers). The African family system prepares the African to appreciate the communal nature of the church. The African extended family system goes beyond the nuclear family to include other members such as grandparents, aunties, uncles, nephews, nieces, and others. Like the ecclesiastical community, the extended family is three dimensional, comprising the ancestors (comparable to the church triumphant), the living (church militant), and the unborn (church expectant). Though people enter the African family as individuals, there is a strong connection that binds all the people in the family together.

The communal nature of the church can be considered in two dimensions. First, the church is an international community that includes people of all nations and maintains unity in diversity (Gorman 2014:283). The communal nature of the church can be understood from the following definition of a community:

A group of interacting people, possibly living in proximity, often refers to a group that shares some common values and is attributed with social cohesion within a shared geographical location, generally in social units larger than a household. (Ovbiebo 2013:10)

The local church usually comprises people in the same geographical area who have experienced the saving grace of God and have a common agenda, to be like Christ. Each local assembly contributes to the overall quality of the church.

Second, the church as a community is a relational community that seeks to develop relationships with God and with one another (Osei-Bonsu 2011:70). Thus, the church's communal nature has both spiritual and social, vertical and horizontal, dimensions. The spiritual aspect has to do with the church's efforts to bring lost humanity back to God. The church has a responsibility to partner God in his missionary agenda of reconciling the world unto himself through the cross. The church – whether individual members or the corporate body – must endeavour to glorify God through worship (Gorman 2014:283). The social dimension includes the church's ministry to the marginalised, the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the hurt, and the violated. The church must not be divided into social classes where some people are seen as first-class members because of their socioeconomic or political status while others are considered inferior.

As a unit, the African family is expected to address the needs of its members. For example, the family protects the young ones from bad influences. In the same vein the church must protect her members from false teachings. In Africa, where many people suffer from injustice, social exclusion, poverty, disease, and psychological illness, the social dimension of the church's ministry is crucial. The African Christian community must become a voice for the voiceless and the marginalised. The church must develop the leadership capacity of its members to be active participants in national political processes. This will ensure that Christian principles are incorporated into public policies. The

church should speak prophetically against ungodly policies run by governments and encourage governments to address the needs of the citizenry rather than amassing state resources for personal gain. In a true community, there is the need for empathy and encouragement. The experience of one member must be the experience of all (1 Corinthians 12:26).

While the comparison between the church and the African family system highlights the communal nature of both institutions, it is important to also acknowledge their differences and the limitations of the African metaphors. The African family is primarily based on biological lineage and kinship ties, whereas the church is a spiritual family where membership is based on faith in Christ (John 1:12–13, Galatians 3:26). Unlike the African family, which one is born into by default, entry into the church is by spiritual rebirth and faith. Additionally, the church, as an international community, is open to all people, transcending ethnic, tribal, and national boundaries (Revelation 7:9). In contrast, the African family system is often exclusive, emphasising ancestry, lineage, and ethnicity, which sometimes creates barriers between different communities. Another key difference is that while the church, as the body of Christ, has an eternal purpose (Ephesians 5:25–27), the African family, though significant in earthly life, is temporary and bound to socio-cultural changes. Another limitation relates to the hierarchical nature of African society. In many African family systems, authority is concentrated in the hands of elders or patriarchs, sometimes leading to oppressive structures where the voices of younger members, women, or marginalised groups are suppressed. In contrast, the church emphasises servant leadership and mutual submission (Matthew 20:25–28). The church needs to note these limitations and find ways to address them in the quest to make the metaphor meaningful to the African audience.

Fellowship and Interdependence

The metaphor of the body also underscores that the church must experience genuine fellowship. The interconnectedness that characterises the body of Christ has no room for isolated Christianity – ‘Jesus, yes; the church, no’ – whereby people claim to be Christians but refuse to fellowship with other believers (Williams 1996:69). Likewise, in Africa, one becomes a member of the family by default not by choice. No one can refuse to belong to the family and so isolated life is not the norm. According to African cosmology, social exclusion is not desirable. This worldview prepares the African Christian to accept the

relevance of Christian fellowship. Just as the African's relationship with the spiritual realm should be reflected in social relations, so the believer's vertical relationship with Christ needs to yield a horizontal relationship with other believers. Erickson (1998:1058) is right to say 'Christianity is a corporate matter, and the Christian life can be fully realized only in relationship to others'. The Christian's most important responsibility to the congregation is to regularly attend the gatherings of the believers (Hebrews 10:25; see Psalm 84:4, 84:10, and Acts 2:42) (Dever 2007:793). The believer does not only need Christ (the head) but also needs other members of the body to survive and grow. For this reason, a believer, by default, is placed in a situation of total interdependence with other Christians.

Fellowship in this sense goes beyond mere social relations to the point where people have a deep mutual understanding and emotional connection. The early church gives a classic example of this fellowship. The newly converted individuals 'devoted themselves to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to the teaching of the apostles' (Acts 2:42). It is interesting to note that among their many pursuits, these early disciples are said to have made 'fellowship' one of their top priorities. This term 'fellowship' derives from the Greek word *κοινωνία* – usually translated 'fellowship', 'community', 'participation', or 'sharing' – describes people uniting for their common good and coexisting as a community (Acts 4–5) (Osei-Bonsu 2011:70). The opposite of *κοινωνία* is *ἰδιος* (*idion*) which implies a private, hidden, and non-participatory experience (Kariatlis 2012:53). The example set by the early church (Acts 2:42–47) indicates that fellowship among believers may lead to the sharing of possessions for the wellbeing of every member of a church. This sharing, however, is not meant to have everybody possessing the same amount of wealth but to ensure that those who have little do not have too little to live on and those who have much do not have too much while others have little (2 Corinthians 8:15).

Thus, the Christian community must be characterised by interdependence, interconnectedness, tolerance, solidarity, and sharing of resources. In the African worldview, one's existence is inextricably linked to the existence of other human beings. This idea is expressed in the saying

My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours [...] A person is a person through other persons. (Tutu 1999:31)

The African communal worldview promotes the ‘spirit of caring and community, harmony, and hospitality, respect, and responsiveness that individuals and groups display for one another’ (Mangaliso 2001:24; see also Meylahn and Musiyambiri 2017:1) and contradicts selfishness and self-centredness. As hinted earlier, the African communal worldview is a good foundation for developing the communal nature of the church.

The practice of *ukusisa* among the Zulu people of South Africa is a practical illustration of how the African communal sense of life informs attitudes towards wealth and its creation. Like many other Africans, the Zulu community holds that human beings originated as a group/family, not as a single individual (Mahlangu 2016:3). Therefore, the interest of the community comes before the interest of the individual. A person only enjoys meaningful existence within cohabitation with other persons. In the *ukusisa* system, a wealthy Zulu man (*umnumzane*) would ‘lend’ a cow and a bull to a poor family (who has no cattle) to take care of (Nussbaum 2003:3). After they had their first offspring, the family would return the original cow and bull but keep the offspring (Nussbaum 2003:3). This is done to ensure that the poor receive their own ‘seed capital’ to progress in life and maintain their dignity. This practice of sharing wealth strengthens the community as a whole. It also reduces the unemployment rate in the society.

Similarly, wealthy African Christians are expected to use their resources to create employment opportunities for their communities, especially the youth in the society. One of the major problems in contemporary Africa is the high unemployment rate. Many African communities are full of unemployed youth who, for lack of employment opportunities, are involved in sports betting, ritual murder for money, illegal mining activities, prostitution, armed robbery, and internet fraud, among other things. They attend church on Sunday and are fully engaged in these unethical activities on Monday. The sharing of resources, life coaching, human power development, and donating seed capital to start one’s own business are some of the steps that can be taken to arrest the situation.

Finally, just as the fellowship among members of the early church resulted in personal and corporate spiritual growth, fellowship among members of the contemporary Christian community is expected to promote the spiritual growth of each member and of the entire community. Each member must have direct access to Christ if the anticipated growth can be realised. It is, therefore, important for the church to ensure effective discipleship of believers through Bible study and application, effective individual and corporate prayer, and intentional evangelism, among other things. African Christian leaders must, therefore, equip their members to practicalise their priesthood in Christ who has made every believer a priest.

Welfare System Reforms

Welfare schemes are very important in any human institution. God established a welfare system for ancient Israel to cater for the needs of such needy people as widows, orphans, and aliens. Based on this example, almost every church in Africa has a form of welfare scheme. One of the common welfare models in many churches in Ghana and Africa today is the No-Contribution-No-Chop (NCNC) policy.² This policy requires members of the welfare scheme to contribute an amount of money every month toward the welfare of the members. The contribution to the welfare scheme is the same for everyone, irrespective of the person's economic strength. When there is a need for one to benefit from the welfare scheme, the person has to provide his/her membership contribution card to prove that he/she has not defaulted in the payment. More often than not, the poor among the people are found to be defaulters and so are disqualified to benefit from the scheme. There are some people who are not able to join this welfare system because of their inability to make the regular contribution. Thus, the welfare scheme that is expected to care for the needs of the needy ends up excluding them from its benefits. The welfare system that is supposed to benefit everyone (but especially the needy), ends up widening the economic gap between the rich and the poor. Such a welfare system does not promote human flourishing. This has created a number of controversies and agitations in some churches.

² Here this policy is used as representative of what prevails in most parts of Africa. The choice to analyse this system stems not only from its prevalence in many African societies but also because of the author's familiarity with it.

The paper advocates that the NCNC model of welfare be replaced by a system that will have everyone contributing according to the person's capacity. The fund raised through this voluntary contribution would then be distributed according to need. This means that all members of the church would be automatic members of the scheme. People would be members of the scheme on the basis of their membership in the church. This would not only deal with the discriminatory character of the NCNC model but would also encourage the sharing of resources that aims at ensuring everyone has the basic needs of life.

The proposed welfare system is based on the principle of solidarity. This welfare paradigm is underlined in the following greeting and response by the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Their greetings and response in the morning and lunchtime would be:

Mangwani, marara sei? (Good morning, did you sleep well?)
Ndarara, kana mararawo. (I slept well, if you slept well.)
[...]
Marara sei? (How has your day been?)
Ndarara, kana mararawo. (My day has been good if your day has been good.) (Nussbaum 2003:4)

These greetings – which are expressed toward a native or a stranger – underline that all persons are interconnected such that one's problem is the problem of all. What the Shona are saying is that we are all so connected to one another that if you did not sleep well, or if you are not having a good day, how can I sleep well or have a good day? Mbiti (1999:106) captures this idea as: 'I am, because we are; and since we are therefore I am'. The individual's life acquires true meaning within a societal context. Thus, in the African worldview, unity is strength; the larger the unit, the better. There is no true being without communion.

The African communal sense of life teaches the African Christian community to think and feel that: 'Your pain is My pain, My wealth is Your wealth, Your salvation is My salvation' (Nussbaum 2003:2). Therefore, the church cannot be considered healthy when individuals are unhealthy. Just as the body parts need one another to survive, so the Christian community also needs every single member to function effectively. Again, the church cannot be a community of

shalom when some of its members are suffering. The church must have solidarity with the poor and the sick through regular visitation, counselling, and donating to them.

Conclusion

The paper has highlighted some areas in which the body metaphor may help reform the church in Africa. The areas considered include how the African communal sense of life might enhance the African understanding of communion ecclesiology. The paper also brought to the fore how the body metaphor may promote authentic and healthy relationships and fellowship among the members of the Christian community. The impact of the body metaphor on the reforms that are needed within church welfare schemes was also highlighted. From the study, it can be concluded that the metaphorisation of the church as the body of Christ suggests God's interest in the human body. This means that God is interested in what one uses one's body for. In a culture where people consider Christianity as a religion that is only interested in the spirit, this metaphor serves to promote the right way of using one's body. It can also be concluded that the African church needs to intensify efforts toward discipleship in order to facilitate the growth and maturity of her members. Finally, care must be taken not to allow denominationalism to create factions among Christians; in the body of Christ denominationalism has no place. Members of the body of Christ transcend denominational, racial, gender, economic, political, and social boundaries. Thus, it is better for Christians to align themselves more with the universal dimension of the church than with the denominational dimension.

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Ochiso, RO 2025, 'Biblical Ethics, Children, and Youth in the African Church: Towards Transforming African Theology and the Role of Youth and Children in the Church', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 121-140

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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Oguok, O 2025, 'Reimagining Bible Study as a Tool for Community Transformation in Informal Settlements', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 141-165

Reimagining Bible Study as a Tool for Community Transformation in Informal Settlements

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Abstract

Bible study groups remain the most potent platform for equipping the saints for ministry in informal settlements. However, they need to be re-evaluated and re-imagined to fulfil this role. The 2004 Pattaya Lausanne Consultation on World Evangelisation registered a concern that still requires urgent attention. Among the critical components of their deliberations for consideration was:

To articulate a potential action plan for the Church to be more effective in pursuing the mission of God in large cities. (Lausanne Movement 2004).

This article, following this concern, attempts to locate and promote Bible study groups as potential hubs for preparing the church in the slums and informal settlements to respond to the socio-political and economic challenges these settlements experience.

Using semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and focus group discussions, data was collected in Nairobi from ten churches in Korogocho, three missional communities run by the Centre for Transforming Mission in Huruma and Kawangware, and two urban theological training teams. A modified form of the praxis cycle, developed by Holland and Henriot (1983), is used to provide a structure and framework for the article, comprising its four moments: incarnation, social analysis, theological reflection, and missional response. Moreover, Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation

has been employed to provide a lens for conceptualising Bible study groups in informal settlements.

Introduction

A fundamental concern is that, as cities continue to grow and slum incidences increase, informal-settlement churches equally multiply but still lack the relevant missional hermeneutics and leadership to spur conversations at the grassroots level. Bible study groups in these settlements seem to narrow their focus to church doctrines, prayer, and using the groups to mobilise members to be more active in their church life. Furthermore, much of the published work intended to aid the study of the Bible does not appear to address the questions and concerns that local communities and churches grapple with. Therefore, it is crucial to consider how to breathe new life and freedom into existing Bible study groups, fostering conversations that provide a theological and conceptual framework for discipleship, ultimately leading to social action and the transformation of slums and informal settlements.

Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of conscientisation becomes a critical concept in helping to frame the desired outcome of Bible study. It invites Bible study groups to become 'a learning space of dialogue, critical thinking, knowledge exchange, and formulation of practical political action' (Mzileni 2020:15) against political, economic, environmental, and religious injustices. Christ the King Parish in Greenmeadows, the Philippines, in reference to Bible study groups, notes that

The communities are considered as a new way of 'being the Church' – the Church at the grassroots, in the neighbourhood and villages. (Christ the King Parish no date)

It goes on to say,

The earliest communities emerged in Brazil and in the Philippines in the late 1960s and later spread to Africa, Asia and in recent times in [*sic*] Australia and North America.

Rayappan (2024) considers them fertile ground for social and religious harmony.

This article hypothesises that a disconnect exists between people of faith and where they live, particularly in informal settlements. It advocates for a commitment of God's people to their neighbourhoods by studying together and developing missional responses that are true to their contexts.

Background: The Lausanne Consultation Occasional Paper 37

Global consultations convened by the Lausanne Movement have resulted in the Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOPs). The participants of these consultations have included evangelical influencers. Billy Graham founded the Movement to "Unite all evangelicals in the common task of the total evangelisation of the world" (Stanley 2013:3). Several papers have been published since its founding. Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 (Lausanne Movement 2004), specifically, is critical because it addresses the issue of 'transformation of our cities/regions'. The evangelisation of the world, which includes our cities/regions, according to the Lausanne Movement, combines evangelism and social action.

In the paper, Christianity is rightly identified as initially being an urban movement. The paper focuses on the fourth component:

To articulate a potential action plan for the Church to be more effective in pursuing the mission of God in large cities. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

The first three components are: first, 'To consider the hermeneutical and theological underpinnings of the mission of God in large cities across the world', second,

To identify the critical questions [...] involved in the mission of God in large cities (keeping in mind that the major concern

at this consultation is how to respond to blockages to evangelism and discipleship)

and, third,

To collect and publish some case studies to help the Church in cities to respond to the theological and critical issues. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

The participants singled out, among others, a specific action plan: ‘to propose tools and resources that will help to equip practitioners to pursue contextual practices in their city-regions’ (Lausanne Movement 2004). Fundamental to this paper is their acknowledgement that the

first source of information that informs urban ministry comes from our Christian traditions: our study of the Scriptures, Church history and Christian theology. (Lausanne Movement 2004)

Although their recommendations targeted churches and schools of theology, this paper primarily looks at Bible study within the local church. The level of Bible study groups is where, more closely, the biblical text and context are brought together in conversation to reflect and discern the good news for an urban context. Unfortunately, the LOP failed to capture the small Bible study groups for city transformation. The question remains whether they are functional in informal settlement communities across the globe and whether they are alive and intentional towards transforming the slum neighbourhoods and cities.

Bible Study in Informal Settlements

Many urban churches across the globe hold weekly Bible study sessions for their members. Several of them happen through small groups, while some prefer large gatherings. Attendance at such meetings is never regular, but the groups continue to meet. The primary purpose of the small groups is to provide an opportunity for each believer to participate and be grounded in God’s word. In Nairobi, like elsewhere, some congregations have a structured Bible study

system while most do not. In these Bible studies, the deductive Bible study method is practised by the majority of churches, with a few using the inductive method. One respondent noted that, in her church, it is the pastor who determines the Bible study topic, which often depends on what he believes the church should be studying. However, regardless of the method used, Scheffler argues:

For it is not the Bible as such that will eradicate poverty, nor our 'objective' study of it, but the way we *interpret* it and are *inspired* by it to become practically involved in the struggle against poverty. (2013:12)

In these Bible study group meetings, little attention has been given to relevant books, articles, and journals to aid the Bible study process. Over 95% of the responses indicated that they do not use any material other than the Bible. The Bible is the primary book churches use, and the term 'bible study' is intended to reinforce the need to study the Bible alone. The Second Vatican Council's document *Gaudium et Spes* (quoted in Kelly 2013:5), on the other hand, takes a different view when it says,

In pastoral care, sufficient use must be made not only of theological principles but also of the findings of the social sciences, especially of psychology and sociology, so that the faithful may be brought to a more adequate and mature life of faith.

It acknowledged the significance of drawing on other literature to provide Christians with the knowledge and tools they need. Unfortunately, the churches are still naïve about the idea of using resources from other disciplines, even though the social sciences would help uncover the layer of oppression and injustice in communities.

Most churches' 'pastoral orientations' (Kelly 2013:1) are prayer, teaching, preaching, and care of God's people, with the aim of forming believers to 'transform reality towards the Kingdom of God'. One interview respondent noted that the discipleship programme aims to make them 'walking Bibles and prayer warriors'. However, the challenge remains whether that particular

pastoral orientation, although well-intentioned, can indeed empower people to become change agents in their communities more effectively than through small groups. According to Freire (1970:47), the people of God within a system of oppression need to engage in a process that

critically recognise[s] its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity.

In this regard, it is prudent and advisable for informal settlements to adopt small groups as platforms for members' theological, ministerial, and spiritual formation rather than large groups.

For informal settlements, the fundamental orientation for adequate impact of small groups in communities lies in forming and practising a spirituality that opens space to enable activism and active participation in urban transformation. For this to happen, a conversion needs to take place in churches and among church leaders. There has to be a radical shift from an inward-looking to an outward-looking spirituality and ecclesiology, from 'all the traditional means and motives for pastoral engagement' (Kelly 2013:2) to prophetic and activist engagements. The prophet Isaiah invites God's people to such a stance (Isaiah 58). A corresponding pastoral, theological development and strategy for effective disciple-making are necessary to make such a shift possible. The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) of Latin America offer a suitable model of what that shift entails. Through them, the God of the Bible was more readily understood as a God of liberation from oppression, with the interpretation of the book of Exodus informing this belief. Such a discovery and revelation were possible because the Bible was in conversation with their context of oppression and the Roman Catholic faith tradition. For the shift that happened, the beginning point was immersion.

Immersion as the Starting Point of Engagement

As Freire (1970:77) stated,

The starting point for organising the programme content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of people.

In this respect, Bible studies remain irrelevant and impotent as long as they limit themselves to spiritual nourishment and not social action. Spiritual nourishment, as critical as it is, must have a direct relationship with changing society. This position calls for a spirituality that refuses to begin with abstract ideas and instead locates itself within a concrete situation. Kelly (2013:9) draws from Grande's principle that the beginning point aims at the process being

personalising, dialogical, creative and critical. It is based on the pattern of action-reflection-action, that theologises their reality, starting from the solidarity of love, faith and hope in this person, here and now.

Furthermore, as Freire (2000:34) observed,

There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Therefore, education, and hence, Bible study, becomes a political endeavour. It is a political endeavour because, as the anonymous saying goes, 'the personal is political'. As much as the issues of shelter, food, and clothing, among others, are personal, they are also political, because politics is about the welfare of the people. Therefore, although they are spiritual exercises, Bible and book discussions in the church also become political endeavours. It follows that the Bible must not be divorced from life on the streets, as its teachings have social, political, cultural, and economic implications. In this way, Bible study groups can operate as Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) to breed and incubate change for the marginalised and impoverished

communities. They provide a good illustration of what it means to be immersed in a context.

Basic Ecclesial Communities: An Example of the Volta Redonda Process

Christ the King Parish (no date: para 2) defines BECs thus:

BECs are formally defined as small communities of Christians, usually of families who gather together around the Word of God and the Eucharist. These communities are untied to their pastors or parish priests but are ministered to regularly by lay leaders. The members know each other by name and share not only the Word of God and the Eucharist but also their concerns, both material and spiritual. They have a strong sense of belongingness and of responsibility for one another.

The BECs offer a perspective on ecclesiology and disciple-making that highlights the potential of small groups to theologise and serve as interlocutors of mission for their communities. Depending on the pressing issue, for instance, the housing challenge in Volta Redonda, Brazil, the communities stepped up to defend their rights and advocate for a more just society in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Faria (2015:2266), BECs oversaw ‘religious faith turned into a tool of emancipation of the working classes’. While explaining the role of BECs in the political organisation around housing in Volta Redonda, Faria observes that a movement within the Catholic Church had

made the choice for the poor, rescuing primitive values of Christianity, geared to solidarity, social justice and critical to [*sic*] competitive market values classes. (2015:2266)

BECs became the breeding ground for liberation theology.

The conditions she describes that workers of the National Steel Company (CSN) experienced are similar to those of informal settlements. They include ‘growth made in a disorderly way, without planning frameworks, such as housing,

piped water, sanitation, public transportation, paving' (Faria 2015:2266). She recognises that BECs became the 'social space of a new consciousness'. She concluded:

The research confirmed the role of liberation theology as the foundation and political- religious claim praxis of urban infrastructure and training tool of social movements in that context. (Faria 2015:2267)

Churches within informal settlements could borrow a cue from the Latin American Catholic Church of that time and adopt a political-religious stance to address the city's neglect of the poor as part of their vocation.

The Basic Ecclesial Communities (BECs) model has been successfully implemented in several contexts around the world, demonstrating its effectiveness in transforming traditional congregation structures into dynamic, community-focused groups. For instance, in the Philippines, BECs have played a crucial role in fostering grassroots movements against poverty and social inequality. They act as platforms for dialogue where members learn to address local issues such as housing, healthcare, and environmental degradation, effectively mobilising resources and support from both the church and local government.

Castillo, Fides, and Habaradas have reflected on the success of BECs in the Philippines. Reviewing their book on the subject, Asuncion observed:

BECs, are able to gather not only individuals but also families, which is a strength of Philippine dioceses that must be continued, nurtured and supported. Furthermore, BECs are regarded as 'homes of synodality' because these promote the participation of the people through dialogue and collaboration. Synodality basically entails the People of God gathering and journeying together. This also applies to how religious education is carried out in classrooms. If a class is reimagined as an ecclesial community, then religious education becomes more than just a subject; it is now a

gathering in the name of God and an opportunity to build Church. (Asuncion 2024:88–89)

By implementing the BEC model and focusing on these critical issues within Bible study groups, informal-settlement churches can cultivate a transformative space for dialogue and action. This approach not only deepens theological understanding but also empowers community members to engage meaningfully with the challenges they face, ultimately leading to holistic social change. And, in order for these small groups to be effective in the African context, since they bring together individuals and families, they definitely require fidelity to the oral tradition of the African people.

Africa's Oral versus Written Traditions and Consciousness

Bible study groups, taking the shape of BECs, require incorporating both the African literary forms and oral tradition. Literary works should play a fundamental role in the conscientisation process and evoke a missional response that fosters community transformation. Written literature is robust. Buhbe (2020), in her blog post 'Activism and How Writing Empowers Us', underscores the weight that good words can carry. She says that, within intense contexts, a skilful use of good words is employed to 'publish essays, create novels, and give speeches that resonate across nations'. Engagement within contexts takes different forms, and writing is one of them. As a form of lending one's voice, literary activism enables one to champion a cause that is not directly related to one's personal experience. Agatucci (2005: Para 3) notes that

Ancient writing traditions do exist on the African continent, but most Africans today, as in the past, are primarily oral peoples, and their art forms and stories are oral rather than in written form.

Amy King (2015:Para 7) argues that

one needs to hear about the lived realities and ideas of 'the Other' so that we might begin to empathise, approach understanding and be willing to relinquish certain privileges,

including risking our own safety, in order to demand the safety and platforms for others.

What she says can take the shape of both oral and written media. She has also observed an existing challenge: the literary platform is not innocent. She says it has been colonised by the rich and powerful, who have capitalised on 'its very existence via white supremacist tendencies in the academy and mainstream publishing world especially' (King 2015:Para 7). However, this does not mean that all literary materials have been captured. On the other hand, her argument provides reasons for developing and using more relevant, decolonised African literature in local churches.

In appreciation of the place of all members at the table, Bible study groups in informal settlements ought to incorporate both oral and written media into their discussions. The key within this arrangement is to allow for detours and cyclical storytelling by African Christians without losing focus. It should honour and accommodate every voice as an epistemological model. Books that could accompany the Bible may be drawn from the oral tradition, such as those by Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. In addition, more African scholarship articulating African urban issues should be utilised to make the Bible more relevant and practical for African Christians.

Tuwe (2016:1) adds that the 'African oral traditional paradigm of storytelling is an effective and suitable social research methodology'. Therefore, he argues that consideration must be made because of

the uniqueness of African storytelling, African storytelling as a communal participatory experience, style and structure of African storytelling, the power of African stories, moral lessons behind African stories, the pedagogical significance of African storytelling, the utilisation of cultural proverbs and parables in African storytelling, African traditional knowledge, cosmologies and epistemologies in African storytelling and lastly the indigenous paradigms and the decolonisation of African social research methods and methodologies. (Tuwe 2016:1)

Bible study groups, incorporating both the oral and written traditions of the African people, would also enhance African conscientisation.

African Conscientisation

Conscientious Bible study in the African urban-informal-settlement church would naturally contribute to African conscientisation. Attributed to the first prime minister and president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, the African conscientisation,

often referred to as critical consciousness, refers to the process of learning to perceive social, economic, and political contradictions, and ensure that there is opposition to harsh elements that may hinder the progress in the three fronts.
(bartleby research no date)

The call is loud because even after many African countries attained independence, most, if not all, remained tied to the hips of their ‘former’ colonial masters and controlled by treaties and economic practices that left them constrained and restrained.

In the wake of the adverse effects of the International Monetary Fund’s and World Bank’s Structural Adjustment Programmes in the 1980s and 1990s (Oringer and Welch 1998; Pettinger 2019), the African conscientisation process deepened. Steeped in abject poverty, incessant civil wars, a gross violation of human rights, and unending political instability, African Christians would need to read the Bible differently, the majority being in sub-Saharan Africa. The continent’s current social, economic, and cultural challenges invite the latest creative and problem-solving strategies, which the church would need to embrace. Therefore, Bible and book study programmes can provide a more conducive environment for such a robust conversation and promote adult education, which has suffered immensely on the continent. Freire’s model not only works in the education system, but its principles also gain broader usage and are applicable in social movements. For example, this model aided the #FeesMustFall movement in South Africa (Mzileni 2020). Therefore, the conscientious Bible study groups would partly address the call by the Lausanne

Occasional Paper 37. The following section highlights their strategic significance.

The Strategic Significance of Bible Study Groups

Small-group Bible studies play a significant role in the theological and spiritual formation of believers. Following the example found in Acts 2:42–47, some of today’s churches have structured themselves into cell groups or home Bible churches where believers regularly gather to study scripture and fellowship. The socioeconomic dynamics of the house churches in Acts led to social action, where the Christians sold their properties and gave them to people who had need. They read their context and understood that their faith required them to respond to the poor or needy among them. As a result, their breaking of bread and fellowship had a tangible effect on the underprivileged. However, whether their action was the best response of the day is not under scrutiny in this article. Instead, the impact of their action has implications for how small-group Bible studies can be instrumental in making informal-settlement churches more responsive.

As Silva (1974:1) has defined,

the term ‘group’ designates any number of persons who are in dynamic relationship with one another, have some significant commonality, and assume some responsibility for one another.

The formation of these groups has a purposive element and serves to provide a safe atmosphere for instruction, comfort, and encouragement (1 Corinthians 14:3, Hebrews 10:24). Silva (1974:2) further observes that

The group that patterns itself after the biblical *koinonia* is powerful. Such groups move beyond fellowship to enable persons to work newly aroused social concerns through to positive and constructive action.

The Acts 2 groups demonstrated Silva's point. They went beyond study and fellowship and, by paying attention to social concerns, engaged in positive and constructive action.

Although it is assumed that the groups purely studied the Bible at the time of Acts 2, the Bible as we know it today was not in existence. The text says, 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42 NIV). They relied on what they heard and spent time discussing and teaching to strengthen their faith and shape their theology. However, it is not clear whether all that the apostles taught found its way into the canon. The point is that Christians throughout history have reflected on and written about the Bible, the church, mission, and faith, which believers can take time to study alongside the Bible. The biggest hurdle to surmount is whether church folk, in the strictest form of Bible study groups, can be willing to agree to study books other than the Bible. Some of the respondents found the idea strange. Although book study groups exist, they are often initiated by individual Christians rather than as the church's policy. Some respondents noted that reading other books together with the Bible would open up the scripture and help Christians contextualise their faith. So often the Bible is read out of context, leading to a faith that lacks rootedness in the concrete situations within which believers find themselves. The newly acquired knowledge, skills, and values can help shape one into a more effective urban practitioner and a more skilled, conscious, sensitive, and well-rounded person.

From the text in Acts 2, another outcome of the small group fellowship was church growth. It records that the growth of the early church occurred as a result of these fellowships. They became the small evangelistic outposts and the fundamental expression of the Christian faith in communities. As a 'means of Christian nurture' (Silva 1974:1), these groups became the space for group life and study and were 'important in establishing Christians in the faith'. An establishment in the faith led to meaningful witness in their neighbourhoods, hence their resultant numerical increase. It can be argued that this numerical growth happened because of their proclamation and response to social concerns. Therefore, those who received the gospel message transformed into community benefactors. They moved from being mere recipients to active participants in transforming the lives of others. The beauty of this is that it was

coordinated by the institutional church, as exemplified in Acts 6, from which the urban church can learn. In addition, the small group fellowships have the potential to curb the spread of the prosperity gospel that is prevalent in urban areas today.

The Panacea of Prosperity Gospel

Within informal settlements is the widespread and fast-growing, disempowering ‘prosperity gospel’, which is due to poverty and other factors. Prosperity theology’s interpretation of the gospel and ministry context is, in itself, an act of contextualisation. In the informal settlements, as elsewhere, it promises financial and economic liberation for the poor. Whether it is the correct model for economic liberation is a different matter altogether. As Niemandt (2017:203) notably opined, its

underlying epistemology is more oriented towards buttressing the worldview of global capitalism than deconstructing the political, social, and cultural domination established by Europeans and their Euro-North American descendants.

In other words, its presence in the informal settlements either entrenches colonial, capitalist mindsets and disempowers the communities, or it can be reinterpreted and applied as a liberating theology. This article aims to address the issue of contextuality as it pertains to the gospel in urban slums.

Kwateng-Yeboah, in his article, ‘Analysing The Social Effect of the Prosperity Gospel on Poverty Alleviation in Neo-Pentecostal Accra, Ghana’ (2016), has rightly observed that

On the one hand, the prosperity gospel appears to demonstrate elements of optimism, entrepreneurship, self-reliance and self-supporting attitudes among believers. On the other hand, religious rites espoused by preachers of the doctrine seem to be embedded with the exploitation of believers, individualism, and a pervasive emphasis on a ‘miraculous economy’, which impedes the socio-economic

transformation believers themselves seek. (Kwateng-Yeboah 2016:v)

The prosperity gospel ought to be understood in its close connection to Pentecostalism. As Pentecostalism spreads across informal settlements, keen attention needs to be paid to its impact on the congregations therein and its influence on small-group Bible studies. Using relevant literary materials in Bible study groups, a deliberate effort must be made to question and challenge the excesses of prosperity theology in order to free believers from its deceitful allure. The focus, therefore, must shift to the facilitators of these groups. Do they possess the required theological training and preparation to lead such difficult conversations with boldness?

Another concern is whether the founders and lead pastors of these congregations will permit such conversations to take place. Such a shift may require a re-evaluation of theological education for pastors and church leaders in informal settlements to ascertain its relevance in decolonising the Christian faith, liberating the church in these settings, and making the church more relevant. It aims to equip local churches to view the gospel holistically and apply it appropriately in their contexts for the benefit of their communities. For the shift to occur, there is a need to reimagine the role of the informal-settlement church.

Reimagining the Informal-Settlement Church

According to Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 (2004), instead of people looking at the spiritual and social plight of the city and asking where the church is, the question to ask is, 'What will the church look like?'. Verster also wrestles with 'how the Gospel can inspire people living in dire circumstances to strive for the fullness of life' (2015:1). It envisions a kind of church that can meaningfully serve the city, since not every church form is suited for the city. In this regard, the city's church ought to be reimagined and structured to function in a manner that makes it relevant and fit to serve its purpose in the city, which is to facilitate the city's social and spiritual transformation. In other words, today's church must be reimagined to become responsive and relevant to its context.

Instead of the church serving only a few leaders and disempowering the masses, slums and cities will be served better when the slum church devolves power to the congregations through Bible study groups. So often, pastors and church leaders concentrate power amongst themselves and leave the congregants dependent on them. Therefore, the church is run by a few individuals while the rest remain spectators or consumers of information and church ministry. Bible study groups have the potential to turn more congregants into active ministers if adequately facilitated. It can happen when the church begins to see itself as a body with all its parts functioning.

Religious institutions in our cities, by concentrating power, more often develop oppressive structures and discourses. On the contrary, opening itself up could help create conversations and spaces where freedom can be mediated. The church in the informal settlement ought to be deliberate in using its power to empower others. Such a church becomes a space for restoring power in the people, releasing hope for a better life and raising new visions for individuals and communities. It begins by listening to the people and their contexts.

Listening to the Community

Bible study groups ought to be faithful to where they are – their contexts. There is a need to listen to the community of which they are a part. Listening to the community embodies a posture of the heart, in response to God's word, that honestly and humbly seeks the welfare of the people, honours their humanity, and recognises their dignity. Using another phrase, it is 'putting ears to the ground'. Kelly (2013:1) argues that there is a need

to always look for the greatest participation possible by the base or least empowered part of a community and never to proceed autonomously or without hearing the community.

Therefore, the church and Bible study groups ought to pay close attention to what is happening in their neighbourhood. The pastoral and faith formation processes should yield a commitment to include all believers, incredibly, the least empowered, in the discussions. The goal is to give life to Christian teaching and

translate [it] into a life of action with the dynamism to transform a person integrally (economically, sociologically, politically, spiritually) as well as the community in which they live. (Kelly 2013:4)

It is necessary because it is also possible to engage in ‘communal prayer, religious acts, and scripture discussion’ (Kelly 2013:4) without producing real change.

As religious programmes and activities crowd the church’s calendar, many congregants continue to internalise pain, rejection, poverty, oppression, and injustice. Merely reciting religious dogma and participating in church activities is no guarantee of freedom. Having a comprehensive understanding of their situation is necessary for an appropriate response. When Bible discussions are conducted effectively, stories of pain and struggle emerge, and the community’s issues are identified, named, and confronted. It immerses the church in the Christian’s life, work, and home. Freire observed:

Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other. (Freire 1970:72)

For freedom to be fully realised, the people themselves should have the ability to determine it.

Taking Back Power

Freire argued that

understanding a situation does little to liberate anyone from it – it is only when people act upon that situation that they become conscientized. (Kelly 2013:6)

Thus, as small groups learn, they transition from ‘magical consciousness’ to ‘critical consciousness’ (Freire 1970), and the community goes through a process that empowers them to be the agents of change. The argument is that

those from outside can only ‘accompany and serve oppressed people’ (Kelly 2013:6), but they also have to be conscious. Therefore, making the necessary tools available and creating forums for the process becomes crucial for local communities. In this way, they can relate their experiences to other social factors in order to respond relevantly.

The conscientisation model of education, proposed in this article through Bible and book studies, changes the relationship between laypeople and the clergy. Mostly, the power gap between the pastoral minister and ordinary worshippers can be huge. Roundtable discussions alter the power dynamics and provide space for new interlocutors to participate in theology. It decongests and devolves power, making theologising from below possible and leading to mission from the margins. Moreover, it radically alters the relationship, allowing for greater communicative solidarity to be achieved. Freire (1970:77) acknowledges that ‘Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication’.

Since the majority of Christians in informal settlements and slums feel disempowered, the Bible study sessions would provide a space for them to speak up, vent, and release the frustrations imposed by silence and non-involvement. In this way, they gradually gain confidence and win back their voices. When they eventually become the voice of their pain and oppression, they shall have taken back the power that was theirs originally. Thus, the power domiciled in the pulpit is devolved into the pews, empowering the church more readily to address its contextual challenges.

From Victims to Agents

Mission in, from, to, and with informal settlements requires the informal settlement church to play a fundamental role. It is at the heart of the settlement and interacts directly with the challenges of slums each day. The active participation of the local church is significant for its relevance, sustainability, and self-propagation within the community. Therefore, the role of Bible study groups in locating and transforming the church into an agent of change cannot be overstated. Otherwise, the church remains like any other

entity in the community, relegating it to the status of mere recipient and beneficiary of mission enterprises from outside.

The call bolsters Verster's emphasis that

The church's involvement in the situation of the poor should lead to a better life for all. When the churches are involved in these situations, they must strive to better the situation of the people and to give them some kind of new future. (Verster 2012:49)

Moreover, the task of resolving what the World Council of Churches (2021) has aptly articulated below can best be carried out within small groups. Small groups can become spaces for deep listening and communal discernment, enabling the generation of appropriate missional responses. The council says,

In order to commit ourselves to God's life-giving mission, we have to listen to the voices from the margins to hear what is life-affirming and what is life-destroying. Therefore, we must turn our direction of mission to the actions that the marginalised are taking. Justice, solidarity, and inclusivity are vital expressions of mission from the margins. (World Council of Churches 2021)

Therefore, a mission from the margins facilitates shared theological reflection and analysis, advocacy, action, and communication at, on, from, and beyond the margins, with the hope of encouraging and transforming churches and societies to be more just, responsive, and inclusive.

Within these small groups, Christians can learn to 'resist the forces of globalisation and empire, and to respond anew to the gospel message for today' (Small 2004:3). The two forces of globalisation and religious and cultural pluralism continue to demand that the local church understand itself within local and global contexts. This process of reflection and theologising is better done in small groups instead of primarily teaching and preaching to large congregations. These concepts and ideas require careful study, discussion, and thought to be fully understood and applied effectively. Focusing on large

groups makes this important goal elusive and unattainable; therefore, it is necessary to demand that the church reconsider its approach to Bible study groups and redefine them. Even though small groups are the way to go, they invite the church to exercise patience, as it takes time to build and maintain momentum to yield fruit. On the other hand, the newly acquired knowledge, skills, and values would help shape members into becoming more effective urban practitioners and more skilled, conscious, sensitive, and well-rounded individuals.

Re-educating Informal Settlement Leaders

The kind of church leaders who can spearhead a movement of Bible study groups would require adequate education and training. Such education and training should lead to policies or ministry philosophy that redirect the entire church or denomination and its structures towards embracing the proposed Bible study method to raise critical consciousness among members. Furthermore, as noted earlier, it is no easy task. It requires reorienting institutions and educators, at both the theology schools and grassroots training programmes, to unlearn and relearn. Moreover, such a shift entails redeveloping their curricula and reassessing their faculty, which may necessitate additional resources.

Since such an endeavour may not be cost-effective for most formal theological institutions, which are complicated by the COVID-19 impact, parachurch organisations, local churches, grassroots organisations, and grassroots leaders are better suited to champion this cause. Moreover, with existing networks and relationships with church leaders within the settlements, parachurch organisations can influence the church by leveraging their trust. However, although they are best suited for this task, Resane (2020:1) has observed that there are 'ongoing tensions between the church and the parachurch', especially in the areas of 'theology, finances, accountability, governance, and human resources'. Therefore, he rightly calls for dialogue between them to resolve the issues and work together to extend the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Lausanne Occasional Paper 37 expressed the desire to articulate a potential action plan for the church to be more effective in pursuing God's mission in large cities. This article sought to ground the conversation within informal settlements as local spaces for the theological and spiritual formation of their members, which are integral for God's mission in the city. It proposes using other relevant literary materials alongside the Bible in Bible study groups as a strategic means of realising this dream. Therefore, there is a need for the church in informal settlements to rethink its mission and devolve theological and spiritual formation through Bible study groups. In this way, it stands to raise critical consciousness among its members, thereby spurring social engagement. Such a shift requires the church to immerse itself in the local community, reclaim its power, and reimagine itself in order to become an agent of change. It will rid the church of the negative side effects of the widespread prosperity theology within these settlements and provide a holistic perspective of the gospel for the communities involved. The article finally argues that re-educating church leaders is necessary to influence policy and develop a philosophy of ministry that places Bible and book studies at its centre, and works towards transforming whole urban communities.

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Tagwirei, K 2025, 'Church Leadership Capacity-building for Rural Community Development: Reflections from the AOG in Zimbabwe', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 166-189

Church Leadership Capacity-building for Rural Community Development: Reflections from the AOG in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The church has been lauded as an able vehicle for community development and inclusive transformation in and beyond Africa. In attending to the need for integral mission, most urban church leaders in Zimbabwe have demonstrated an enabling capacity to identify and address the socioeconomic, political and environmental issues that bedevil their communities. Challenges remain in rural congregations and communities that are still hard-pressed by a series of political, socioeconomic and environmental crises. Although some urban-based denominational and ecumenical leaders have contributed to development in various outlands, rural clerical leadership capacity is low and in serious need of attention. Many related publications have covered the role and contributions of the church to community development in Zimbabwe, especially in urban settings. There is a large gap regarding rural, pastoral capacity-building for inclusive sustainability. This paper applied a qualitative case study of the Assemblies of God, a literature review and participant observation in theoretical view of Hoeft, Jung and Marshall's *Practicing Care in Rural Congregations and Communities* (2013). It identified rural Zimbabwe's community needs and suggested pastoral capacity building strategies to enhance desired development.

Introduction

It is fitting that the church has been commended globally as an able vehicle for community development and inclusive transformation. Researchers have discussed the contributions of churches towards community development in and outside Zimbabwe, such as providing education and health services, promoting citizenship and enacting economic empowerment and national healing (Chitando 2020; Magezi and Nanthambwe 2022; Moyo 2024; Msebi 2022; Nanthambwe 2023; Tagwirei 2024a). Zimbabwe is distressed by a multiplicity of political and socioeconomic crises (Dendere 2025; Agrawal 2023; Vambe 2023). Bearing in mind that the mission of the church is holistic, the ability to identify and address issues that affect communities is golden. The challenge is that Zimbabwe's rural congregations and communities remain unstable, even though some churches have been assisted by external aid to enhance their contributions to community development. For example, churches in the Bikita rural community of Masvingo were funded by a Christian non-governmental organisation from abroad to conduct empowerment training to identify and address their community needs (Magezi 2017). Similarly, the majority of faith-based and faith-owned development projects in Zimbabwe's rural areas, such as schools and clinics, were established by missionaries with foreign aid (Kanyongo 2005; Ngundu 2021). While acknowledging various development initiatives that have been facilitated by Zimbabwean ecumenical and denominational leaders, this paper explores rural pastoral capacity building for sustainable development. It starts by overviewing the research methodology, reviewing the Zimbabwean rural context as well as church and Community development in Zimbabwe and the history of the Assemblies of God (AOG) church, which is used as a case study. The paper ends with strategies to rebuild pastoral capacity for countryside community development. While acknowledging various development initiatives that have been facilitated by Zimbabwean ecumenical and denominational leaders, this paper explores rural pastoral capacity building for sustainable development. It starts by overviewing the research methodology, reviewing the Zimbabwean rural context as well as Church and Community development in Zimbabwe and the history of the Assemblies of God (AOG) which is used as a case study. Towards ending, strategies to rebuild pastoral capacity for countryside community development are considered.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study of the AOG in Zimbabwe. A case study was considered suitable because it explores issues from the specific context in a detailed way (Barbour 2014; Flick 2018). A qualitative case study generates rich data, descriptions and examples, and exposes the concerns of participants that arise from their lived experiences and contexts. By observing the model of Hoeft et al. (2013). This study engaged with AOG materials, such as its constitution, procedure manual and related literature. Complementarily, the author – one of the pastors – applied participative observations. In observing that rural congregations and communities are largely marginalised by cosmopolitan centres of power, Hoeft et al. (2013) question and explore answers to what can be done to meet pastoral, congregational, and community needs in rural contexts in the United States of America. They diagnose unique challenges facing rural pastors, congregations and communities. Their considerations of rural marginalisation, neglect and incapacitation relate closely to problems that rural pastors, congregations, and communities face in Zimbabwean rural environments. This study draws lessons from the call of Hoeft et al. (2013) for ecclesiological and pastoral attention to identify and address problems of the countryside that hinder pastoral ministers from attending to their work in various contexts. Hoeft et al. (2013) explore how pastors can advance holistic ministry in marginalised places – which are similar to the Zimbabwean countryside. In discussing the significance of understanding rural contexts, engaging with communities, intersecting with local leadership and embracing diversity for holistic transformation, their observations and suggestions are highly informative for a contextual study such as this. Therefore, the following section overviews the Zimbabwean rural context.

Overview of the Zimbabwean Rural Context

The Republic of Zimbabwe is a landlocked country in southern Africa, located between the Zambezi and Limpopo perennial rivers. It is bordered by South Africa to the south, Botswana to the west and southwest, Zambia to the northwest, and Mozambique to the east and northeast. Zimbabwe was born on 17 April 1980 after a protracted war of independence.

According to Countrymeters (2025), as of 1 January 2025, the population of Zimbabwe was estimated to be 16,454,043 people', of whom about 68% reside in rural areas (Sibanda 2019:7). Nationally, the country faces disturbing levels of poverty, unemployment, underemployment, food insecurity and gender inequality, as well as vulnerability to climate change and unsustainable use of natural resources (Sibanda 2019). I previously clarified that Zimbabwe faced an unsettling political and socioeconomic catastrophe throughout the rule of the late former President Robert Mugabe, which has continued to the present time and the incumbent president Emerson Mnangagwa's administration (Tagwirei 2024b). The countryside of Zimbabwe is characterised by political, socioeconomic and environmental volatility (Bone 2025; Ncube et al. 2018; Nyathi 2024). According to the Zimbabwe Livelihoods Assessment Committee, 'prolonged mid-season dry spells, unemployment and lack of income generating projects were the most reported community development challenges' (ECHO 2024:254). Though the government is expected to facilitate the necessary community development, much of its recent and present interventions has been selfishly politicised and denies recipients their right to participants in their own development processes (Tagarirofa and Chazovachii 2013). Researchers confirm that governmental support is given on partisan grounds, which exclude citizens deemed to be supporting or belonging to opposition political parties (Langa 2024; Mukubwa 2024). Some places served by pastors are reeling in abject poverty. For example, the experiences of a pastor who planted a rural church in Chitakai in January 2024 are explained as follows:

The living conditions in the rugged and mountainous Chitakai area are exceptionally harsh. Locals can barely make ends meet. They engage in subsistence farming to survive and depend heavily on the weather. 'Sadly, they did not receive rain this year' (de Vreugd 2024)

While keeping this in mind, the next section reviews church and community development in Zimbabwe.

Reviewing Church and Community Development in Zimbabwe

Despite all its challenges, the church has been involved in community development in Zimbabwe since the nation gained its independence from colonial rule in 1980. From the time Christianity was introduced by missionaries, the church contributed to the education, health, and economies of communities through establishing schools, hospitals, clinics, road networks, farms, and related developments. According to Ruzivo (2008), the first prime minister of Zimbabwe at independence called on churches to partner with the government in development. The prime minister requested the church to rebuild schools that had been vandalised during the war of liberation, provide safe drinking water for growing communities throughout Zimbabwe and to construct roads as well as medical facilities in both urban and rural areas.

Eventually, the church contributed a great deal to agricultural development through farming and creating employment, thereby broadening food reserves for the nation. It is also publicly known in Zimbabwe that the former president of Zimbabwe, Canaan Banana, encouraged churches to work closely with the government and the Zimbabwe Council of Churches to uphold African values and play a prophetic role. Consequently, Zimbabwean churches value missionary work and play their diaconal roles. Marimbe and Ndawonde (2024) studied the contributions of new neo-Pentecostal prophetic movements whose founders and leaders are known for self-serving commercialisation of the gospel in Zimbabwe. These scholars submit that churches have contributed much to the educational, medical, and economic development of Zimbabwean communities. Similarly, most evangelical and mainline churches have facilitated public medical outreach activities with medical doctors across the country to give citizens access to medical consultations and prescriptions, free of charge. Musoni (2013) chronicled the contributions of Pentecostal churches to community development in Zimbabwe, such as the establishment of orphanages, scholarship funding for disadvantaged children, establishing a rehabilitation centre for people living with disabilities, and empowerment projects for vulnerable women and widows by Zimbabwe AOG in Africa. Evangelical, Pentecostal and African independent ecumenical bodies such as the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe (EFZ), Zimbabwe Council of Churches and Zimbabwe Christian Alliance facilitated transformational evangelism,

discipleship, constitutional and citizenship awareness campaigns (Tagwirei 2023b).

Considering that Zimbabwe has been hard pressed with human rights abuses (Muzambi 2017), church-led constitutional and citizenship awareness campaigns have been very relevant. Since the year 2012, the EFZ has advanced integral mission and has engaged churches and communities to identify and address their problems (Tagwirei 2024). Through such efforts, the EFZ recorded various infrastructural developments in rural areas across Zimbabwe. Similarly, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches ran empowerment projects that imparted entrepreneurship skills and resilience, as well as citizenship-awareness campaigns for inclusive nation-building purposes. The researcher witnessed some of the developmental projects facilitated by ecumenical bodies and some denominations, which are transforming lives in towns and peri-urban areas in Zimbabwe.

In spite of these commendable contributions, some remote areas of the country are yet to receive tangible developmental initiatives. I agree with Guzura and Tshuma (2016) that the majority of developmental projects extended to rural areas have been mainstream, top-down and envisioned, funded, managed and operationalised by urban-based organisations, churches, or individuals. Consequently, such initiatives have remained foreign and less effective than they could have been if they had been owned and run by locals. Bearing in mind that approximately 80% of rural Zimbabwe's population are the poorest and most vulnerable and needy in Zimbabwe (Juel 2023; Tom 2024), church leadership capacity building is crucial to enhance the holistic mission of the church. When pastors, elders and their subordinate pastoral leaders are capacitated, they can lead the church to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in all spiritual, social, political, economic, and environmental areas of life – which collectively yield community development. As this study is based on the case of AOG, it is important to give a historical account of the denomination.

Historicising the AOG in Zimbabwe

Reference to history is pivotal for contextual understanding, hence the engagement with AOG for a case study. The AOG is a classic Pentecostal

denomination that was planted by white missionaries a few undocumented years before 1959 and officially launched and led by the black apostle Nicholas Hepworth Bhengkosi Bhengu in 1959 in Harare, the capital city of Zimbabwe. Bhengu was a South African crusader who had been born on 5 September 1909 at a Lutheran mission in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa (Chibango 2021). He established a massive missionary movement called Back to God (BTG) in the 1950s, institutionalising and operationalising it, and planting churches in and outside South Africa (Chibango 2021). Though the AOG had been planted in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and other southern African countries by missionaries (Lephoko 2010; 2018). Bhengu is unanimously regarded by Zimbabwean AOG leaders and members as the founder of their church in Zimbabwe, because he officially opened it, raised leaders, structured and provided oversight in Zimbabwe until he died. Chibango (2021:74) reports that ‘Nicholas Bhengu later passed on 07 October 1985 at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa’. Bhengu established structures in the same way that he did for the AOG BTG work in South Africa, such as having regular elective national conferences followed by regional councils (Tagwirei 2022). Since then, the church has grown beyond the urban sphere to some rural areas, such as Gokwe, Mhondoro, Nemamwa and Bikita (Tagwirei 2022). Therefore, the church can advance an integral mission that fosters holistic congregational and community development. Unfortunately, as a result of a national economic meltdown, it has been reported that the AOG, like most churches that depend mainly on traditional sources of income such as tithes, freewill offerings and donations, became incapacitated and failed to advance holistic gospel in urban and rural areas (Tagwirei 2022). Considering this situation, it is imperative to review the capacity of AOG rural church leaders in Zimbabwe.

Reviewing the Capacity of AOG Rural Church Leaders in Zimbabwe

While ecclesial leaders include deacons and others, this review focuses on pastors and elders because they are the senior leaders of their local assemblies. Rural AOG pastors and elders in Zimbabwe are a diverse group. A few of them have been theologically trained and are culturally, economically and developmentally sustainable, while numerous others are untrained and culturally, economically and developmentally vulnerable and unsustainable. It

should be noted that theological training is not mandatory for pastoral leaders in the AOG. The old AOG constitution, section 42:f, states that

every minister is advised to take an approved course in Bible school training, but academic accomplishments shall not always be a condition affecting the recognition of applicants for ministerial credentials (Assemblies of God, n.d).

Similarly, the draft AOG constitution of 2014, section 6.7.7, states that

every minister may take an approved course in Bible training but academic accomplishments shall not always be a condition affecting the recognition of applicants for ministerial credentials (Assemblies of God, n.d)

Thus, for the AOG, training is an issue of personal choice. Consequently, some pastoral leaders have pursued theological training, and others have not. Because theological training offers knowledge on hermeneutics and biblical, Christian, political, economic, liberation and integral missionary theologies, pastoral leaders who lack training tend to struggle to meet the demands of ministry, especially in economically volatile rural contexts. Since the political and socioeconomic situation is less favourable in rural areas than in urban centres, the church allocates its trained pastors to towns where living and working conditions are better. From participant observations, the researcher, as an AOG pastor in Zimbabwe, found pastoral deployments to rural areas to be highly selective. Usually members of the AOG District Council

leaders predominantly transfer junior pastors, while most seniors usually object and only move in circumstances beyond their powers, such as when ill or dead (Tagwirei 2023a:1).

These allocations are based on economic insecurity, as the rural economy is worse than in urban areas of the country; this is a predicament faced by most churches Zimbabwe. Chengeta (2023:n.p) reports that, 'in my observation, there are more sound urban churches preaching the gospel and being planted than rural ones'.

The researcher is aware of churches that support pastoral leaders who have been deployed to rural areas, such as the United Methodist Church, which gave their rural pastors motorbikes and facilitated seminars on income-generating ideas and projects such as poultry farming (Ashdown 2022; Chingwe 2018). Sadly, the majority of churches do not support rural pastoral leaders. Therefore, these pastors struggle to make ends meet in the absence of the resources they need. Most clerics in Zimbabwe churches do not receive formal salaries. They get by on the generosity of congregations, because there is a societal attitude in the country that being a pastor is a 'calling' and not a salaried profession. Mwareya (2023) reports that for the few pastors who receive formal salaries in elite churches in cities, wages are as pitiful as US\$300 a month. In rural areas, pastors live in even more precarious situations and are paid not in cash but by gifts such as live chickens.

It is also common for rural pastors to lack cars for transportation; they are required to walk long distances to attend to their pastoral work (Kumuterera 2021). Most of them also lack financial and material resources to develop themselves, their churches and their communities. Out of desperation, some Zimbabwean rural pastors are engaging in unconventional methods of survival, such as bootleg brewing and gold panning (Kugwa 2021; Simango 2022). According to Simango (2022:n.p), 'City pastors are buffeted with tithes, better wages, allowances and gifts from city congregants who're usually professionals: nurses, accountants, dentists ... So even if church wages are sporadic and unreliable in Zimbabwe, the gifts city pastors receive shield them from destitution'; yet, 'Zimbabwe's rural districts are hotspots of entrenched household poverty ... So, rural church ministers, because they are stationed in districts buffeted by poverty, share the hellish experience of one of the world's most troubled economies'. In such contexts (Simango 2022:n.p), 'dozens of other unpaid rural Pentecostals, evangelical or Adventist pastors in his Chimanimani district dabble in artisanal gold mining too to keep afloat'. Other pastors who failed to overcome poverty in rural areas have migrated to towns or have left Zimbabwe in search of greener pastures (Mwareya 2023). The same has been the case with the AOG; some of its rural pastors gave up their work of ministry and took up other occupations elsewhere in or beyond Zimbabwe.

Thus, church leadership capacity building is important for the pastors who have remained and who continue to minister in distressed rural areas, so that they can develop themselves, their churches, and communities effectively. If capacity is not built, the rural church and rural communities will continue suffering and waiting for outside support that can make substantial development possible. It is believed that, once pastors and elders are capacitated, they would be able to capacitate their subordinate leaders and followers and, thereby, ensure sustainable and inclusive grassroots community development under local leadership and participation.

Rebuilding Church Leadership Capacity to enhance Rural Community Development

As explained above, church leadership capacity building is integral for inclusive sustainability in the rural areas of Zimbabwe. Taking into account what Hoeft et al (2013). observed in American rural contexts, and reflections from the Zimbabwean countryside, community engagement, public leadership and the embrace and enabling of diversity can enhance community development. By considering contextual observations based on the AOG, other local churches and rural situations, theological training, mind-set transformation, communal economics, and partnerships could be attended to. Considering that capacity building is a broad and complex issue, the following suggestions are not comprehensive but can contribute much towards enhancing pastoral capabilities in inclusive rural community development.

Contextualising Pastoral Capacity Building

This study uncovered that the majority of rural AOG pastors lack theological training. Without theological training, leaders cannot manage their lives and execute their leadership roles effectively. The researcher concurs with Ncube and Kgatla's (2021) findings from Epworth Farm Mission Station that some pastoral leaders inherited and have failed to manage enterprising and developmental initiatives that were established by missionaries. Nevertheless, the church carries the diaconal mission of God to care for the needy, everyone, and everything, and should thus enable inclusive development. So, it is recommended that mother churches facilitate or support theological training for pastors, elders and their subordinate leaders on hermeneutics and the theologies of and entrepreneurship for personal, collective, family, ecclesial,

and community development. In the absence of knowledge of hermeneutics and theologies of development, ecclesiastic leaders could misunderstand community development as being secular and thus fail to contribute to it. Pastoral leaders should be trained to understand and live out biblical concepts of community development such as fruitfulness, peacefulness, progressiveness and blessedness (Nanthambwe 2023).

Most importantly, the mission of the church is integral. As I explain elsewhere (Tagwirei 2024a), the church is mandated to proclaim and demonstrate the gospel in all socioeconomic, political and environmental areas of life. The correct hermeneutics of James 1:22 could inspire the church to live out the word of God, be the salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13–16) and believe and share the totality of God-given transformation (John 10:10) in all communities. Once ecclesial leaders and members are trained, they can be inclusive and transformational in their contexts.

Considering the poor governance, corruption, inconsistent policies, worsening economic crises, and deterioration of healthcare, education, infrastructure and the supply of basic needs such as water and electricity in urban areas (Ansari 2024; Bushu and Kufakurinani 2024; Denya 2025; Kawadza 2025), the administration of incumbent President Mnangagwa is failing to maintain and develop the nation. Therefore, it is useless to expect this government to facilitate sustainable development in rural communities. While some parachurch, ecumenical and other non-governmental organisations have been facilitating development projects in certain rural areas, they cannot offer everything that is needed. Additionally, whatever they offer remains foreign and unsustainable unless and until local members of communities participate, own and become capacitated to initiate and sustain their own community developments. Accordingly, the AOG (and other churches) should consider developing pastors' knowledge of hermeneutics and theologies of development, and should ignite, enlighten and empower them to manage sustainable development in their respective areas.

Engaging Community, Exemplifying and Advancing Development

As Hoeft et al. argue,

there is a sense of interdependence in rural communities that pushes care beyond a particular congregational membership to being offered by and for the whole community (Hoeft et al 2013:14).

Hoeft et al. explain that pastoral leadership should engage with community leaders or representatives and become informed about and collectively strategise to address issues that are identified. The review of the Zimbabwean context in this paper uncovered that the economy of Zimbabwe is unstable, basic needs are costly and livelihoods are pathetic. Engaging with poverty-stricken contexts demands sustainable economics.

It is recommended that AOG pastoral leaders consider tent-making to sustain and capacitate themselves and to exemplify and advance development. As exemplified by Paul in Acts 18:1–4, if pastors build up their economies through undertaking part-time jobs or establishing businesses, they can raise funds to initiate and sustain development projects. Tent-making can sustain pastoral welfare and ministry, inspire followers and support them and their communities to develop themselves (Ndelwa 2003). Doing so is imperative, because traditional sources of church income, such as tithes, freewill offerings, donations and related collections, are inconsistent and contingent on fluctuating economic situations, capacity, understanding and the willingness of believers (Tagwirei 2022) and, thus unreliable. Like most other church pastors, AOG pastoral leaders in Zimbabwean rural areas cannot exemplify tangible personal, family, ecclesial and community development with traditional church economies. It is prudent for them to revolutionise their ecclesiological economics by becoming more enterprising. Although doing business as a church or as a gospel minister is problematic because it risks the commercialisation of the gospel and stimulates negative impressions by diverting from free service provision to profit-making and corruption, this submission concurs with my previous conclusion (Tagwirei 2022) that pastoral leadership can missionise business by applying biblical principles, remaining honest, consistent and faithful and utilising the proceeds for advancing all-inclusive missionary work for the betterment of communities. In that way, tent-making can emancipate clerics from being burdens to being blessings for their congregations and communities. This is reminiscent of the message of Paul to the Corinthians, namely that he was not a burden to anybody during

his missionary journeys because he was involved tent-making (2 Corinthians 12:13–16).

Given the fact that, nationally, Zimbabwe is undergoing disturbing economic hardships and that congregations have been correspondingly constrained, tent-making is contextually strategic for pastors and elders to generate their own incomes to complement what their assemblies provide, thereby exemplify self-sustainability and initiating development for their churches and communities instead of being burdens. Because not all pastors and leaders are business-minded and knowledgeable, it is recommended that entrepreneurship seminars and related training is provided for them and their subordinates, congregations and communities, to enlighten and empower them to identify business ideas and to start up, manage, sustain and utilise businesses that are run for purposes other than selfish goals, such as to achieve inclusive community development.

Transforming Community Culture and Mindset Towards Sustainable Development

Drawing from the recommendation of Hoeft et al. (2013), that community pastoral care should offer public leadership and embrace and promote diversity, there is a need to transform the culture and mind-set of villagers to appreciate and participate, with their diverse resources and abilities, in developmental initiatives. Traditionally, Zimbabweans, like most Africans, have superstitious beliefs about wealth and poverty. We are in agreement with Rwanda's President Kagame:

Everything starts with a clear and even very simple vision for the future that everyone understands and agrees on. We all want a prosperous, stable, and equitable Africa. And we want it as soon as possible. ... One, let's change how people think. Two, shape how resources are allocated and later on utilised. [...] transformational change happens at the level of mind-sets. ...

A mind-set of urgency, ownership, responsibility, and service as well as quite frankly the mind-set of money-making and long-term investing (Princewell 2017:n.p)

If we accept that vision means ‘the act or power of seeing’, thinking, or imagining (Merriam-Webster n.d; see also Patton 2017), pastoral leaders could engage with their community to determine their needs and draw and direct ecclesial and community attention towards collective development. Public engagements, empowerment and leadership determine development, as exemplified by Nehemiah (Tagwirei 2024a, 2024b). Pastors, elders and their supporting leaders can, then, transform community mind-sets. Mind-sets should be transformed to enable people to come to terms with the need for development, to mobilise human, financial, material and immaterial resources from among themselves, and participate in programmes that are meant for them (Deo 2022). In the absence of mind-set change, developmental initiatives for communities will not be sustainable. This is why some Zimbabwean ecumenical bodies, such as the EFZ, have been facilitating envisioning seminars about integral mission across the nation, in an attempt to enlighten citizens and encourage them to take responsibility and initiate and collaborate in identifying and seeking solutions and mobilising resources for their own transformational development (Tagwirei 2023a).

Such capacity-development strategies have brought about change, but there is still much room for rural citizens to improve their mind-sets in relation to sustainable development. Bearing in mind that the AOG and various other churches in Zimbabwe have been dependent mainly on traditional sources of income, such as tithes, freewill offerings, donations and related collections (Tagwirei 2022), pastoral leaders should teach their rural congregations and communities to think ‘outside the box’ and revolutionise their economics in order to transform themselves. If pastoral leadership and communities start believing that they have solutions for their challenges, they can utilise what they have and develop and sustain themselves. As faith comes by hearing the word of God (Romans 10:17), it has been shown that, when pastors and elders provide teachings regarding community development, villagers’ mind-sets can be changed and they can start believing and taking part and, eventually, leading their development

from the recommendation of Hoeft, Jung, and Marshall (2013) that community pastoral care should offer public leadership and embrace and promote diversity, there is a need to transform the culture and mindset of villagers to appreciate and participate, with their diverse resources and

abilities, in developmental initiatives. Traditionally, Zimbabweans, like most Africans, have superstitious beliefs about wealth and poverty (Princewill 2017). We are in agreement with Rwanda's President Kagame:

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A mindset of urgency, ownership, responsibility, and service as well as quite frankly the mindset of money-making and long-term investing.

[...] In the African context, however, we can grow very old waiting for the invisible hand of the market to work its magic. (Kagame 2016:n.p)

Developing Communal Economics

The inclusive, other-centred, collective, and complementary communal economics of the early church can also be transformational for Zimbabwean rural communities. Communal economics refers to mobilising, combining and sharing possessions to meet needs of everyone in a community. By interfacing ecclesiology with economics from the book of Acts 4:32–33, Augustine (2016:219) explains communal economics as sharing and managing people's resources together, which is in contrast to individualism and capitalism. By drawing from communalism, pastoral leaders in rural areas can teach and facilitate mobilisation, combination, sharing and investment of the human, material, nonmaterial and financial resources that villagers own, to achieve the goal of collective sustainability. While rural areas may have limited financial and material resources, they have retired or currently employed people who possess skills that they can contribute. If pastoral leaders facilitate processes of searching, identifying, mobilising, combining and utilising available resources to achieve community development, the necessary developments can be accomplished.

Considering the interconnected nature of rural and urban communities, collective efforts can be strategised beyond communities to share resources from the children, relatives and well-wishers of community members in other rural and urban areas. Communal life enhances group cooperation and support and is inspired by love and concern for one another, for the common good (Hombana 2023). Just as members of the early church sold their possessions, including land, to meet the needs of the needy from within the church, local communities and advanced holistic mission, integral mission and inclusive transformation can be realised if today's pastoral leaders apply the same approach to underdeveloped rural areas. Selflessness, cooperation, complementarity and generosity can transform rural lives, livelihoods, and communities.

Conclusion

This paper explored and addressed church leadership capacity building in distressed rural Zimbabwean contexts. While the church should be appreciated for contributing to various developments, especially in urban settings, it should be reawakened to fill the gap of rural ecclesial leadership potential and to sustain existing and initiate contextually needed transformational developments. Without capacitated clerical leadership, church-driven community development in Zimbabwe's rural areas may remain minimal, foreign and unsustainable. In light of this scenario, this submission applied the approach of Hoeft et al. and contextual observations from the AOG. It argued that it is pivotal to contextualise church leadership capacity building and to identify and tackle pastoral and community needs collectively. The paper concludes that pastors and elders should exemplify development by establishing sustainable individual, family, church and community projects. Eventually, pastoral leadership ought to facilitate the cultural, mind-set and communal economics of their communities by presenting theologically sound, contextually relevant, consistent, and transformational teachings.

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Aluko, OP 2025, 'The Responses of the Christian Church to Pandemics in Nigeria: a Historical Comparison of the 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 Pandemics', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 190-213

The Responses of the Christian Church to Pandemics in Nigeria: a Historical Comparison of the 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 Pandemics

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Abstract

In the past, pandemics have influenced how religious organisations respond to emergencies and play a part in society. The Christian church in Nigeria has responded to pandemics in a variety of ways over the years, especially during the COVID-19 and 1918 influenza pandemics. By making use of secondary sources, the theological, institutional, and social aspects of Christian responses to pandemics in Nigeria are examined in this historical analysis. It draws attention to significant changes, such as the 1918 pandemic's shift from faith-healing techniques and spiritual rebirth to COVID-19's technological adaption, humanitarian efforts, and public health initiatives. The paper makes the case that, although both pandemics posed difficulties for Christian institutions, they also aided in the growth of churches, changes in doctrine, and the development of church-state relations. The study sheds light on how Nigerian Christianity continues to adjust to health crises and more significant societal changes by contrasting the two historical periods. The results imply that pandemics not only put religious fortitude to the test but also act as stimulants for modifications in Christian attitudes towards science, technology, and government.

Introduction

Over the years, one form of pandemic or another have ravaged the entire world, including Nigeria. This has caused many untold hardships to persons, institutions, and countries worldwide. As a result, many have looked for alternative ways of staying alive and active in their different endeavours. While some cannot make any headway, others have been brought into the limelight and have hitherto experienced stardom. One of many such institutions is the Christian church in Nigeria. Previous studies on pandemics have received considerable scholarly attention globally (Balfour and Scott 1924; Beveridge 1977; Collier 1974; Heaton and Falola 2006; Jordan 1927; Mills 1986; Ohadike 1991; Oluwasegun 2015; Patterson 1983; Patterson and Pyle 1991; Phillips 1990; Phimister 1973; Potter 2001; Taubenberger and Morens 2009, 2010; Tomkins 1992, 1994). These studies have examined the historical, medical, and socio-political dimensions of pandemics across different contexts. Some research has also explored the intersection of pandemics and religion, particularly the role of religious institutions in responding to health crises (Ayegboyin and Ishola 2013; Fagunwa 2020; Kowalczyk et al. 2020; Peel 1968; Phillips 1987; Quadri 2020; Wildman et al. 2020). However, despite this wealth of literature, there remains a significant gap in the historical documentation and critical analysis of how the Christian church in Nigeria has responded to pandemics over time.

Existing studies primarily focus on individual pandemics, such as COVID-19, without a comprehensive historical survey of how the Christian church in Nigeria has reacted to pandemics over different historical periods and how these responses have shaped religious practices, theological perspectives, and church growth. This study, therefore, using secondary sources, builds on the researcher's previous work (Aluko 2020), which focused on the Christian church's response to COVID-19, by broadening the scope to analyse and compare the responses of different Christian denominations to major pandemics that have impacted Nigeria, particularly the 1918 influenza pandemic and COVID-19. Furthermore, it examines the implications of these responses on the church, society, and the broader religious landscape in Nigeria.

Meaning of Pandemic

According to Samal (2014:165),

a pandemic is an epidemic with a higher magnitude in terms of geographical area, number of cases and days of suffering resulting in disabilities or deaths.

It is an epidemic that spreads globally (Patterson 1985; Saunders-Hastings and Krewski 2016). This is why Cunha (2004) and Muthu (2005) believe '[p]andemics can spread from continent to continent and across the world in a few months' (Cunha 2004:141) through the human population, thereby affecting a large number of people, a significant part of a nation, the entire nation, a continent, or a part of the world as a whole. Moreover, with the availability of technological advancements worldwide, there is every possibility for a massive spread within days. However,

A disease or condition is not a pandemic merely because it is widespread or kills many people; it must also be infectious. (Samal 2014:165)

Also, pandemics are distinguished from epidemics by their geographical spread and have caused significant illness, death, and disruption for centuries (Saunders-Hastings and Krewski 2016:1). Furthermore,

if the novel virus has the ability to infect humans and achieve human-to-human transmission, and possesses virulence for humans, a pandemic may arise, as humans are unlikely to have appreciable immunity to the novel strain. (Saunders-Hastings and Krewski 2016:2)

The *Dictionary of Epidemiology* (Last 2001:131) defines a pandemic as

An epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people.

The classical definition, however, includes nothing about population immunity, virology, or disease severity.

Modern definitions include ‘extensive epidemic’ [6], ‘epidemic ... over a very wide area and usually affecting a large proportion of the population’ [7, p. 94], and ‘distributed or occurring widely throughout a region, country, continent or globally’ [8], among others. (Morens, Folkers, and Fauci 2009:1018)

In the case of influenza, biologists also require that pandemic strains undergo key genomic mutations, known as antigenic shifts. For the World Health Organisation (WHO) to pronounce a level six pandemic alert, there must be sustained transmission in at least two regions. WHO’s (Kelly 2011:540) standard definition of pandemic influenza refers to a situation in which a new and highly pathogenic viral subtype, one to which no one (or few) in the human population has immunological resistance and which is easily transmissible among humans, establishes a foothold in the human population. At that point, it rapidly spread worldwide.

The Christian Church and Pandemics in Nigeria, 1918 and 2020

As the advent of Christianity in Nigeria was in two phases – the first phase being a failed attempt in the fifteenth century, while the second phase firmly established the Christian faith in 1842 even though Ajayi (1965) has already noted its advent in 1841 – the emergence of the pandemic in the country could be rightly traced to the influenza pandemic of 1918–1919. This influenza pandemic, also known as the Spanish flu, was an exceptionally deadly global pandemic caused by the H1N1 influenza virus (Fagunwa 2020:52; Taubenberger and Morens 2006). It was believed to have started in March 1918 in Kansas, United States (Patterson and Pyle 1991:5), with some other cases recorded in countries like France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in April. Though the number of casualties recorded often varies between scholars (Jordan 1927:229; Mills 1986:10; Ohadike 1991:1393; Patterson 1981:401-431, 1983:497; Patterson and Pyle 1983:1305-1306), it is generally agreed

upon that the pandemic was very deadly. Africa was affected by the second and third waves of the pandemic (August–December 1918 and January–July 1919, respectively) to the extent that 1.5–2 million people were recorded to have died from its surge (Ohadike 1991:1393; Patterson and Pyle 1983:1299, 1991:14). According to Patterson and Pyle (1983:1299),

The devastation of late 1918 and early 1919 was as totally unexpected, unexplainable and uncontrollable in Africa as it was on other continents.

In Nigeria, the first case of the Spanish flu was recorded in Lagos on September 14, 1918, appearing initially in ports used for transporting military personnel and supplies (Hartley, Danielson, and Krabill 2021:8; Ohadike 1991:1394; Patterson and Pyle 1983:1304). It reached Abeokuta on 1 October 1918, Ibadan on 5 October 1918, Onitsha on 14 October 1918, Warri on 17 October 1918, Owerri on 25 October 1918 and other parts of the country (Ohadike 1991:1394–1396). This influenza dealt a mighty blow to the country, especially in Lagos. Quoting a correspondent in the *Lagos Standard* on 23 October 1918, Peel (1968:60) notes that,

Lagos has passed through terrible times these last two or three weeks . . . it is like a veritable city of the dead.

In fact, Hartley, Danielson, and Krabill (2021:8) note explicitly that ‘Lagos lost 1.5% of its 81,941 inhabitants’. According to Ohadike (1991:1396),

out of a population of 18 million, about 500,000 died in Nigeria during the outbreak, slightly over a quarter of a million in southern Nigeria and slightly less than a quarter of a million in the northern provinces.

Ayegboyin and Ishola (2013:34) even wrote that,

It is recorded that within a short time, as many died from the plague as had died from the four years (1914–1918) of deadly conflict on the battlefield.

However, despite the various attempts to curtail the spread of the virus, many were infected. While some died, others ‘developed immunity to the virus’ (Hartley, Danielson, and Krabill 2021:8). While the devastating effect of the pandemic was untold, churches and other organisations were shut down by the British colonial government, thereby crippling the community’s religious activities and paralysing its spiritual life. Ayegboyin and Ishola (2013:34) noted that many Europeans returned home, and a few missionaries abandoned their congregations to heed the call to return to their countries. Several churches were without ministers, and spiritual matters seemed to fade into oblivion.

More recently, there has been the advent of the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19). Named COVID-19 by the WHO on 11 February 2020, it is a pandemic from Wuhan, in the Hubei province of China, emerging in December 2019. The coronavirus disease has developed new variants that are believed to be more severe than the first. The first was the Beta variant, which was discovered in October 2019; the second was the Alpha variant from November 2020; the third is known as the Delta variant from December 2020; the fourth is known as the Gamma variant from January 2021, and the fifth is the Omicron variant from November 2021. These variants are of particular importance due to their potential for increased transmissibility (Shahhosseini et al. 2021), increased virulence, or the reduced effectiveness of vaccines against them (Kupferschmidt 2021). As of 25 September 2022, there were 6,579,331 deaths worldwide (Worldometer 2022), while Nigeria recorded only 3,155 deaths as of 25 September 2022 (Nigeria Centre for Disease Control 2022).

It could be said that the recent pandemic is not as deadly as the 1918–1919 pandemic, especially in Nigeria and Africa at large, because of the casualty rate. This is because, unlike Europe, America, and Asia, Africa has hitherto recorded few cases of death emanating from the sting of the virus. Nonetheless, many countries, including Nigeria, imposed lockdowns on their countries to contain the virus’s spread at the outset of the coronavirus disease. As a result of this lockdown in Nigeria, many institutions were greatly affected, and the Christian church was no exception. Churches were locked down with no physical meeting in the country, especially in states where the effects of the virus were so severe. One of the effects was noted by Adichie (2021), who opined that many Catholic Christians in southeast Nigeria began to lose their faith due to the lockdown, as the weakness of faith was mainly prompted by

restrictions on participating in parish activities because of the lockdown. As noted by Peel (1968:60–61), there were ‘strong protests’ against the closing of churches during the 1918 pandemic; the same also took place during the lockdown that the government imposed for COVID-19.

The Responses of the Christian Church during the Pandemics

The two pandemics that have affected the Christian church in Nigeria happened in two different epochs. With over a century’s difference, both pandemics have had a great effect on the outlook of the Christian church in its present form. As the pandemic ravaged the country, the Christian churches responded in their various ways. Below are some of their responses.

The Rise of the Aladura Movement

The movement now known as the *Aladura* could be said to have started due to the aftermath of the First World War and the 1918 pandemic (Ayegboyin and Ishola 2013; Peel 1968). As many people were looking for a way out of the surge of the pandemic, some groups decided (upon claiming to have divine directions) to pray and seek the face of God for divine intervention. The primary group during this particular period was the *Egbe Okuta Iyebiye* (Precious Stone or Diamond Society) under the leadership of J. B. Sadare, the church’s people’s warden. He was supported by some members of the St Saviour’s (Anglican) Church, Italupe, in Ijebu-Ode. It must be noted here, however, that the vision to found this group was received by Daddy Ali, the sexton of the church (Fatokun 2010:5). Some other prominent persons like Sophia Odunlami Adefobe and David Ogunleye Odubanjo also joined the movement. Several people were said to have received healing through the prayers of this group (Ayegboyin and Ishola 2013). However, since there is no written and verifiable evidence that people were healed of the virus, one may want to discard the claim that such was baseless. Still, there is no claim also that those people did not recover. Nonetheless, as this movement was battling for its survival, another group came on board in 1925. Though it could not be said that its emergence was directly linked to the 1918 pandemic, it could be rightly said that it emerged due to the penchant for prayers. Since the aftermath of the pandemic is not something that can be quantified, many citizens of the country still depend on prayers; thus, there is a need to be

involved in prayers to solve all things. This is the Cherubim & Seraphim (C&S) society that was co-founded by both Moses Orimolade and Christiana Abiodun Emanuel (née Akinsowon). However, it was noted by Anderson (2001:82) that Orimolade also prayed for the crowds who came to him for healing. Nonetheless, other movements like the Church of the Lord (Aladura or Prayer Fellowship), founded by Josiah Olunowo Ositelu in 1930, and Samuel Bilewu Joseph Oschoffa founded the Celestial Church of Christ in 1947.

Reduction in the Influence of the Mainline Churches

There is no gainsaying that the mainline churches (Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Presbyterian, Qua Iboe, and so on) had been at the forefront of evangelising the frontiers of the country before the pandemic. Still, the advent of the 1918 pandemic reduced the influence they wielded on the church. Since many of these churches were shut down, like the St Saviour's (Anglican) Church, Italupe, Ijebu-Ode, many did not see any reason to continue attending these churches after the emergence of the Aladura churches (Fatokun no date). The Aladura churches had given them a taste of the indigenous feel to the extent that they incorporated some practices in an indigenous way (like drumming, clapping, dancing, and so on) into Christian thought and actions. Also, with many claiming to have been healed through the prayer of the Aladura churches, they have continued to worship with these churches.

Spiritual Awakening

It is no news that before the emergence of the Aladura churches, many Christians were lukewarm about their Christianity in the mainline churches (Peel 1968; Turner 1979). Even the separatist (Ethiopian) churches that started from the 1888 division in the Baptist Church could not look for a solution to this lukewarmness due to their love for independence from the mainline churches. The only thing they were after was independence; they had hitherto continued in the practices of the mainline churches. The time of the 1918 pandemic appeared to be an excellent opportunity for spiritual awakening. This is because many of the leaders of the Aladura churches gave themselves to intense prayer, which dominated this particular period. Also, they could concentrate on teaching and studying the word of God and the avenue to

exercise their spiritual gifts, for which there was no opportunity in the mainline churches. Fagunwa (2020:52) notes in line with this thought that

Pandemics often bring devastation but could also be an opportunity for spiritual awakening through prayer, love in action, social justice, compassion, and care.

This shows that the 1918 pandemic was a blessing in disguise for Christianity, helping it to thrive during that period.

Massive Evangelisation

Sophia Odunlami used the 1918 pandemic to be involved in massive evangelisation about what she believed was the cure to the pandemic, which had almost become insurmountable. Also, she used the opportunity to preach Jesus Christ to people. Apart from Odunlami, Moses Orimolade was an itinerant preacher during this period before he finally settled down in Lagos in 1924 (Omoyajowo 1982:3). Moreover, many Christians continued evangelisation without minding the lockdown during the COVID-19 period. This time around, it was the internet that took over. This shall be explained better at another point.

Divine Healing

One significant response of some Christians during the 1918 pandemic was their absolute reliance on the fact that only God could heal them. Once they were able to gather rainwater and endeavour to pray to have it consecrated, healing was sure. Even if we are unsure whether there were healings, one is confident that the group (Precious Stone Society) grew so much during this period. If it were not so, they would not have elicited as many followers. Ogunewu and Ayegboyin (2017:5) opine that ‘the fervent prayers of Precious Stone Society members prevailed over a serious situation – the bubonic plague’. Without the help of vaccines or any other orthodox medicine, many Christians who relied on the claims of this society were said to have been healed.

Conspiracy Theories

One peculiar thing about the way some Christians responded to the COVID-19 pandemic was the use of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories abound to

the extent that many Christians have hitherto refused to take vaccines against the disease. They have hinted that the vaccines that are meant to protect people against illness are linked to the devil. Some have also attached the virus to the Antichrist with the number 666 (the mark of the beast) (Aluko 2020:118–119). Others have related its root cause to the technological advancement of the 5G mobile network, which is aimed at creating a new world order (NWO). Prominent among these Christians is Pastor Chris Oyakhilome, founder of Believers' LoveWorld, popularly known as Christ Embassy (Aluko 2022:10, 12).

Reversion to Orthodox Medicine for COVID-19

Though the 1918 pandemic brought about an increase in prayer for a cure, as the pandemic defied both orthodox and traditional medicine, COVID-19 has made many trust in conventional medicine. Many have taken to the use of vaccines to prevent them from contracting the virus. Though some Christians have refused to partake in the use of the vaccines, many leading Christian figures have thrown their weight behind their usage. Among these persons is Pastor Enoch Adeboye of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), who notes,

If there are nations in the world that say that I cannot come to preach the gospel there because of vaccination, I will do anything for Jesus Christ. If no vaccination hinders me from doing the work God has called me to do, even if they ask me to be vaccinated 100 times, I will be vaccinated. (Dumo 2021)

With this, many of his followers have equally been vaccinated. Another leading pastor, Matthew Ashimolowo, founder of Kingsway International Christian Centre (KICC), has supported the use of vaccines. He notes,

I have taken the vaccine. I encourage all to take the vaccine. Do not listen to conspiracy theorists. Some have said many things about the vaccine, do not listen to them. (Dumo 2021)

Also, the senior pastor of Trinity Church, Ituah Ighodalo, notes that

It is foolish to keep having faith that God will protect you from an infection when He has made provision for vaccines that can provide a high percentage of protection. I have taken the jab. I prayed about it and got a clear direction from God to go and receive it. I have explained this to my people in the church. (Dumo 2021)

To Ighodalo, life-saving medicines were created by God through scientists and so should be taken.

The vaccines have also been taken to churches during Sunday services for Christians to receive the jab, and many have responded positively. Also, churches could adhere to different precautionary measures to avoid spreading the disease. There was the avoidance of handshaking, social distancing, using nose masks, hand sanitising, checking the temperature at the church entrance, and so on.

Switch to Online Services

Virtually all the strands of Christianity in Nigeria switched to online services during the ongoing Christian evangelisation of the country. Some churches that had not been involved in using various media outlets like YouTube, Mixlr, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Zoom quickly got used to these media. These online services were made possible through the availability of the internet (with the use of data). Many churches that could afford the cost of live streaming their services online bought into it and have made good use of it to their advantage (Aluko 2020:116). This is because they could continue with their services despite the lockdown and have continued to have income in the church purse, as many were persuaded to continue to pay their offerings, donations, or tithes into their bank accounts. However, one particular thing that must be noted here is that churches that were used to online services only complemented their efforts during the lockdown. In contrast, others had no choice but to kickstart it to continue impacting their members (Aluko 2020:116–118, 2022:19).

Support for the Government

Against the fact that churches did not have a say in the affairs of the state during the 1918 pandemic, the COVID-19 period has seen many Christian

churches supporting the government in every way. They did contribute to cushioning the effect of the pandemic on the nation by donating money, medicine, and food and even opening up their hospitals for the government to use. For example, the Catholic Church opened 425 health facilities across the country as isolation centres, the Citadel Global Community Church donated three church buildings to the government for isolation centres, and so on (Aluko 2020:120–121). Also, many of the churches gave relief materials to both their members and non-members alike.

Perception of the Pandemics as Punishment for Sins

As I have argued previously (Aluko 2020:114), some Christians believe that the existence of the virus in the country and the world at large is due to the sins committed by people. They see it as the punishment for the world's sins that God is meting out on sinners. Also, it is seen as a curse; this curse is a punishment for the world's many sins. Thus, for the virus to go away, Christians and the world must ask for the forgiveness of their sins and draw back to God. This is also the same as the vision Sophia Odunlami claimed to have seen during the 1918 pandemic. In this vision, she claimed it was repeatedly revealed to her that members of the church were 'sinning' in various ways such as using medicine (both native and European), eating kola nuts, drinking too much palm wine, wearing charms, wearing fine clothes, and having feasts on Sundays (Fatokun no date) (though it must be stated that some of these practices cannot be classified as sin since they are medicinal and good for the body, like eating kola nuts and wearing fine clothes). Lending credence to this claim, Ayegboyin and Ishola (2013:12) note,

Some members of the Faith Tabernacle and the Cherubim and Seraphim Society contended that the sins of the Yoruba Christians and the clergy were responsible for the visitation of the influenza epidemic and the depression that hit Yoruba land in 1918.

This has also been the explanation given by some Christian clerics as a cause of COVID-19, which has defied human solution. But if the two pandemics result in

punishment and a curse for sinners, why are the supposed righteous also affected by the scourge of the virus? Is God now interested in the death of a sinner [rather] than for such [sinners] to repent? (Aluko 2020:114)

This may not outrightly be true as we may not be able to neglect the role of human beings in the emergence of these pandemics.

Comparative Analysis of Christian Responses to Pandemics in Nigeria

Faith vs Medicine: Shifting from Prayer to Science

The change from solely depending on divine healing to a more comprehensive strategy that includes medical interventions is one of the most obvious distinctions between the Christian response to the 1918 influenza pandemic and to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nigerian Christian groups, especially those associated with indigenous prophetic movements, rejected Western medicine during the 1918 pandemic and instead used faith healing, fasting, and prayer as their main methods of fending off the illness. Leading this faith-based response were the Cherubim and Seraphim Society and the Precious Stone Society (later the Christ Apostolic Church), which placed a strong emphasis on divine involvement and prophetic revelations (Peel 1968). The main reason these movements gained hold was that people were looking for alternative spiritual remedies because colonial medical facilities were either inaccessible or thought to be ineffective.

In contrast, a more varied and nuanced response from Christian churches was exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many religions adopted scientific advice, such as social separation, mask-wearing, and immunisation, even as they maintained their emphasis on heavenly healing. As already noted, well-known religious figures who publicly supported vaccinations and urged followers to follow public health recommendations included Pastor Enoch Adeboye, Matthew Ashimolowo, and Ituah Ighodalo, among others. Meanwhile, certain Pentecostal leaders, such as Chris Oyakhilome, rejected vaccinations and spread conspiracy theories that connected the outbreak to the New World Order and the Antichrist (Aluko 2022:10–13). According to this, many Christian

churches now acknowledge the validity of medical research, which is a considerable change from the 1918 influenza response, even though faith healing is still a big element of Pentecostal and charismatic traditions.

From Resistance to Strategic Engagement in Church-State Relations

During the 1918 influenza pandemic, many churches complied with the directives of the colonial administration for a lockdown of churches, but some decided to continue to gather to worship (Fatokun no date). Indigenous Christian movements understood colonial medical measures as attempts to subvert religious authority, and they saw the pandemic as divine vengeance for societal crimes. The newly formed, African-led prophetic movements, which preferred faith healing over Western medical techniques, became estranged from the mainline churches as a result of this resistance (Fatokun no date; Peel 1968). The COVID-19 pandemic, on the other hand, witnessed a more planned and comprehensive interaction between the state and the church. Many church leaders worked with the government to support public health efforts, while others opposed lockdown measures. For instance, the Nigerian Catholic Church supplied more than 425 medical institutions to serve as isolation centres and other churches gave impacted populations food, cash, and personal protective equipment (PPE) (Aluko 2020:120–121). Some churches have included medical outreach initiatives in their missions after realising that a successful pandemic response required striking a balance between faith and science. Despite these developments, some groups continued to be suspicious of state interference, especially in charismatic and Pentecostal movements where end-time predictions and conspiracy theories about government overreach were common. This illustrates how, despite improvements in church-state relations since 1918, certain Christian groups continue to be sceptical about government-mandated medical procedures.

Technological Adaptation: From Physical Gatherings to Digital Worship

In contrast to the 1918 pandemic, when church services were either held in violation of government directives or ceased entirely because of limitations, a defining characteristic of the COVID-19 pandemic response was the broad use of digital technology for religious purposes. Churches in 1918 relied entirely on in-person meetings for community support, healing services, and worship.

Many churchgoers experienced spiritual isolation as a result of church closures, which fuelled the growth of autonomous prophetic movements that prioritised house fellowships and small-group worship. In contrast, churches used digital channels to continue religious involvement during COVID-19. They adopted livestreaming services on Facebook, YouTube, and Zoom, and they also used online tithes and donations to retain financial support. While smaller churches struggled because of restricted internet connection and budgetary restraints, megachurches like RCCG, Winners' Chapel, and Deeper Christian Life Ministry were able to shift smoothly because of pre-existing media infrastructures. Long-term changes in Christian worship have resulted from this technological transformation; many churches have continued to hold hybrid services (online and in person) even after the pandemic ended. Notwithstanding these developments, digital worship presented difficulties, especially for rural congregations with poor internet access. Moreover, because many Christians found virtual church services less satisfying than traditional gatherings, the sense of community and spiritual fellowship was undermined. The success of COVID-19's digital adaption marks a dramatic change from 1918 when churches lacked any way to hold worship other than physical assembly (Aluko 2020).

Humanitarian Engagement and Increased Church Involvement in Social Welfare

A significant distinction between the two pandemics is the extent of the church's humanitarian efforts. Christian churches in Nigeria did not contribute significantly to social welfare during the 1918 influenza outbreak. Since the pandemic happened during colonial rule, there was little interaction between Christian organisations and public health services, and many of them were exclusively focused on spiritual interventions. However, church-led humanitarian initiatives dramatically increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to support overburdened healthcare systems, several denominations created medical facilities, gave financial assistance to families in need, and donated relief supplies (Aluko 2020:120–121). It is noteworthy that churches that had previously disassociated themselves from social activity now play a larger role in community welfare, indicating a change in how Christians are understood to be responsible during emergencies. This distinction demonstrates the Nigerian churches' increasing institutional power

in the present era. Today's Christian institutions are better equipped financially and structurally to address societal crises than they were in 1918, when churches had little say in public health programmes. This development implies that contemporary churches view their function as socially, politically, and humanitarianly significant, in addition to spiritually so.

Perceptions of Pandemics as Punishment for Sin vs Scientific Explanations

The way that pandemics were interpreted theologically in the two periods is another notable distinction. The consensus in 1918 was that the pandemic was divine retribution for the misdeeds of society. Seeing the illness as a component of God's wrath, many Christian leaders, especially in indigenous churches, urged followers to turn from their sins and seek divine protection (Ayegboyin and Ishola 2013). During this period, rites of spiritual purification and prophetic visions became widespread. During COVID-19, there was a discernible trend towards scientific explanations, even though some aspects of this belief remained. Numerous Christian leaders encouraged people to take precautions after acknowledging the virus's biological nature. Nonetheless, some charismatic and Pentecostal preachers persisted in relating COVID-19 to the Book of Revelation and the arrival of the Antichrist in order to present it as proof of end-time prophecy (Aluko 2022:10–17). This difference in theological interpretation highlights how religious views have changed throughout time, with modern Christianity showing more receptivity to scientific discussion, albeit with occasional opposition.

Implications of the Various Responses

Indeed, different implications could be gleaned from the various responses of the Christian church in Nigeria towards the two pandemics under study. Below are some of the implications of these responses.

1. The two pandemics have brought about the continuous and massive spread of Christianity to the nooks and crannies of the country. The two pandemics brought about the expansion of the Christian religion in and outside the country through various media outlets. Those who had not heard anything about Christianity before the 1918 pandemic

were made to know about the religion through the activities of many itinerant prophets and prophetesses.

2. While many people sought the face of God for healing during the 1918 pandemic, there was a renewed interest in the use of orthodox medicine for many people to be healed and protected from the scourge of the disease.
3. Cleanliness was encouraged, as many Christians were urged to always wash their hands before entering the church and make it a point of duty in their daily lives. This has caused some people to become used to this kind of way of life; it has become part and parcel of them as they have now inculcated the habit in their daily lives.
4. While the Christian church was relatively active in supporting the colonial government during the 1918 pandemic, it was very active in supporting the government during COVID-19. This is seen in the churches' contribution of money, hospitals, drugs, etc. This shows that the Christian church has the country's interests at heart. Invariably, the church has demonstrated the love of Christ to the nation.
5. It has been shown that it is not a sin to use orthodox medicine, as some Christians have claimed it to be. With the way many church leaders are encouraging the use of vaccines to help with COVID-19, there is a paradigm shift from the scenario of 1918 when many Christians depended on the power of prayer for divine healing. This shows that the same God who heals with prayers also answers prayers for the scientist's success in producing good medicines that cure illnesses.
6. The various responses have helped in the growth of the country at large. This is seen in how the Christian churches have brought succour to the country's populace, who are often the brunt of every pandemic.
7. No doubt, the switch to online services was an excellent idea, but only for those who could afford it, who cannot be compared to those who could not afford it. Thus, many Christians were left to themselves like

sheep without a shepherd, as there was no means they could continue to worship together.

8. Christians, especially Christian leaders, are to be conscious of whatever they say in times of crisis of this nature. With the various conspiracy theories peddled around during the COVID-19 pandemic, many might have believed these leaders to their detriment. Some might have even determined not to take the vaccines (assuming they are from the devil) nor use the 5G network (believing it is the cause of the virus). Whatever is being uttered by these people ought to be 'seasoned with salt' any time they discuss national issues.

Conclusion

Pandemics are not a normal experience in the world. There has never been a time the world has experienced a pandemic and remained the same. It often brings devastation to all and sundry. The two pandemics under study have shown the high mortality rate usually recorded during pandemics. They have affected the Christian church so greatly that Christians could not worship together, as churches were locked down with no movement in the country. This has made the Christian church in the country respond to the pandemic in its own way. However, their responses differ even as they have two different epochs. This may be attributed to technological advancement, improved medical knowledge, scientific innovations, the advent of social media, and so on. Their responses are sometimes negative, like the conspiracy theories being peddled. Still, they have been mostly positive to the extent that the Christian religion benefited from it. More importantly, it must be noted that for every pandemic in the country, there will be a corresponding increase or growth in the spread of Christianity in the country, albeit in different dimensions.

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Odhiambo, AL 2025, 'Challenges and Solutions in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems in Africa Inland Church: Nakuru Town Region', *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2 pp. 214-241

Challenges and Solutions in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems in Africa Inland Church: Nakuru Town Region

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Abstract

This research intended to discover the challenges confronted in the administration of human resource control systems in the Africa Inland Church (AIC), Kenya. The objective was to identify the control systems, evaluate the challenges that are prevalent to the administration, and to propose solutions to such challenges. Mixed research methodology was used to respond to the study questions. The population of the study included the pastors and support staff from the 11 churches within AIC Nakuru Town Region church council jurisdiction giving a total number of 76 respondents. To determine the sample size, random sampling method was used to settle for a sample of 64 participants out of the population. Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 24, while qualitative data was analysed using NVivo version 12. The study found that most churches have not developed effective human resource management control systems as there was a serious lack of control documentation like policy manuals, church vision and mission, organisational structure, and code of conduct. The study also found several challenges in the administration of human resource management control systems. Such include lack of proper job supervision, unclear church vision and mission, and conflict between the various departmental leaders and among the pastoral staff. The study recommended proper orientation of all appointees and church staff on their various job descriptions and on church vision and mission statements. The study also recommended training of church leaders

on the importance, and effective use of human resource control systems. It further recommended that churches should develop and inscribe the human resource control systems in their structure to ensure consistency and ownership of the system by all stakeholders.

Introduction

Management Control Systems (MCS), as defined by Longfield-Smith (1997), refer to “the processes through which managers guarantee that resources are acquired and utilised efficiently and effectively to achieve the organisation’s objectives.” The church as an organisation should have its objectives, for as we read in the Bible, “where there is no vision, people perish” (Prov. 29:18, KJV). These visions and objectives are to be aimed at and fulfilled satisfactorily. Management control systems are critical for the church in gathering and analysing information to assess the performance of its resources, ultimately influencing the church’s behaviour in implementing its strategies. This definition is in line with scriptural teachings on accountability and controls. The Bible build the concept of internal control system in many ways. For example, whenever money was handled by the Levites, the Bible spell out that it was given to specific people who carried the work (2 Chr. 24: 11-12). God himself demanded internal accountability in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20: 2-17), and required the acceptance of professional church administrators (Exod. 18:21).

MCS provide essential information for managers to perform their roles effectively (Otley, 1999). Its purpose is to solve the problem of overwork, burnout, and unnecessary anger in the line of ministry. This information provides organisation in performance (Otley, 1999). It is general knowledge that work performance by church staff is key, though it is not given as much priority by church leadership as have the growth of membership, giving, and member’s participation in the ministries in church, without an awareness that these are all glued to the concept of performance.

In his study, Anthony (1965) distinguished “the management control system from strategic planning and operational control.” He further noted that management control entails tools and processes that influence the behaviours of individuals in an organisation to attain its objectives. He broadened the

discussion by identifying key components of management control systems, including strategic plans and structures. He emphasised that leaders should ensure that employees' decisions align with the organisation's objectives while distinguishing management control systems from decision-support systems. He argued that the management mechanism is a cohesive system that should evaluate the organisation from every perspective. Therefore, controlling the behaviours of organisational actors strictly from an accounting or management viewpoint does not contribute to a comprehensive system. This distinction is crucial because many times organisations, including churches, focus on developing strategic plans and then stop, mistakenly believing that they have adequately controlled their human resources.

A perfect MCS must monitor both the internal environment and external changes. Such external changes affect the church employees in various ways including the handling of human resources from other churches, the distance between workplace and the residence of an employee, the environment, and the family stability (Hanzlick and Brühl, 2013). MCS are systems and machinery that organisations use to accomplish goals, achieve objectives, and positively implement strategies. These systems help integrate efforts, motivate employees, support decision-making, communicate objectives, and provide feedback. (Hanzlick and Brühl, 2013).

The MCS concept is divided into two subsections. The first section has to do with output controls, which sometimes is also called result controls. It involves controls where specific results are evaluated against set expectations (Cunningham, 1992). The category allows corrective actions to be taken when necessary. This category of human control builds on administrative controls, action controls, formal controls, standard procedures, manuals, and the monitoring aspects of human control. The second category of human resource control has everything to do with controlling how people behave in an organisation. It also has something to do with the control of personnel and social contracts, which guide individuals in their responsibilities and conduct (Cunningham, 1992). In addition, the category encompasses controls such as values and norms and how individuals within the organization interact and uphold them. It further involves the choice and engagement of personnel with the necessary skills and attitudes, as well as work design and task allocation. Additionally, it includes the observation of employees' work behaviour. These

two categories are not mutually exclusive; rather, they can supplement and strengthen each other within an operative MCS (Cunningham, 1992).

Both internal audits and external audits play important roles in organisations. While external audits have evolved significantly, internal audits lack a guiding theory for academic research and practice. Additionally, the academic literature on internal audits is sparse. Boyle (2010) attributed this gap to the absence of a theoretical framework for understanding the internal audit as a tool for organisational control.

Despite its general recognition in amongst researchers and professionals, the concept largely overlooks the internal audit as a crucial control function for organisations. Consequently, the absence of inquiry has hindered the development of a cohesive theory (or theories) for the use of internal audits.

While MCS has been widely studied in corporate settings, its application in church administration presents unique challenges. Some argue that churches should not be required to implement control systems because they can operate solely on trust. While this might be an ideal situation, it is unrealistic. Welch (2011) captures this idea where he points out a time when the church could say computers were too expensive or were designed for larger church or that to hire someone to operate the computer is too cost prohibitive but in his amazing conclusion he says, “These are no longer valid statements”. The church corporation must demonstrate that the property is safe to congregations and other beneficiaries. Without evidence of implemented checks and controls, it cannot provide that assurance and accountability so needed by the congregation today. Studies conducted by Tanui, Omare and Bitange (2016), proves that the internal control system can be used as effective financial management in the church. A study by Agyei-Mensah (2016) further explained that the implementation of an internal control system in the church would encourage the implementation of duties and responsibilities according to existing procedures or regulations to reduce or prevent fraud in the church.

It is important to keep in mind that although only a small minority of people are dishonest, all organisations should take proactive measures to prevent situations that may tempt individuals to commit fraud. Furthermore, if a church does not provide clear guidelines, individuals may unknowingly act in

ways that could harm the church's reputation. For example, they might fail to separate church funds from their personal finances or neglect responsibilities they should have taken on (Welch, 2011).

Management without realistic control systems can be disastrous, confusing, and dangerous. It creates room for compromise, underperformance, unethical conduct, and costly relationships that can lead to a big organisational loss of resources.

For a long time the Africa Inland Church was managed through a system that dictated that one individual, the pastor, with a few supporting elders, was responsible for all managerial responsibilities. This group set ethical standards for the church, determined relationships, and controlled all church resources (AIC, 2009). Within this system, the task of control belonged to a few individuals rather than to an established system. In history, this “big man” concept of leadership and control has been used to silence all other people from questioning when things are going wrong. This kind of inquiry automatically translated to disagreement with the system, leading sometimes to discipline of the inquirer.

The church, like any other organisation, needs a system that transcends an individual or a small group of selected elders to bring control of human resources. Few studies have been undertaken to address the control measures in the AIC. This study explores the challenges faced in the administration of human resource control systems in the AIC, specifically within the Nakuru Town Region, identifying key issues and proposing strategic interventions. In so doing, it addresses the following questions: What are the challenges that the local church leaders and support staff face in the administration of human resource control systems in AIC Nakuru Town Region? In addition, what are the solutions to the challenges that the local church leaders and support staff face in the administration of human resource control systems in AIC Nakuru Town Region?

This study will benefit pastors and church leaders who establish control systems in their churches, thus developing good relationships with the congregations. This study is also important for developing young leaders—future top-level church administrators—who will be well grounded on the

principles of management. It will benefit the next-level structural offices like the Area Church Council and Central Church Council, which will have an easier time overseeing the regional church council because the management will be effectively cascaded to the lower-level leadership with a clear structure.

All of these policy makers and leaders will benefit by developing human resource policies that are aligned with biblical and theological truths. Further, theological schools will benefit by the inclusion of controls courses in their curriculum. This study helps them know how to teach pastors to develop and implement such policies.

Critical Review – Theoretical Literature Review

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is a concept in social psychology that explains how individuals interpret the causes of events and behaviours, including their own. This theory can be applied in human resources (HR) to help managers understand employee behaviour and to assist employees in reflecting on their own thought processes.

At the core of attribution theory is the idea that people are continually seeking to explain the events they encounter. For example, they might wonder why their research proposal was rejected, why they received a poor performance rating, or why a train is running late. Attribution theory was initially developed by Heider in the early twentieth century. It sparked scholarly interest in causal reasoning. Subsequent contributions from researchers like Kelley and Weiner led to the development of several related theories of attribution (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Attribution theories aim to clarify how people form causal inferences, the inferences they make, and the resulting behavioural and attitudinal consequences. To succeed in a study examining the challenges faced in the administration of human resource control systems, attribution theory will be critical, as it will help explain the participants' reasoning regarding the challenges they encounter.

Stewardship Theory

Stewardship theory builds on the fact that a management should not be motivated by individual goals but rather aimed at their primary outcome goals for the benefit of the organisation (Hernandez, 2012). The theory assumes a strong relationship between church members' satisfaction and performance in terms of financial strength and numerical growth. The theory shows that the church board is not motivated by individual goals but rather prioritises the interests of the church. Church boards have accountability or responsibility in managing the church in terms of both church finances and other church activities. Church boards or church management teams act as stewards who serve to manage church resources. The congregation as the principal is the owner of these resources. This is carried out so that the church treasurer has responsibility for the management of church finances. Hence, they can be held accountable to the public or the church congregation.

Critical Review – Empirical Literature Review

Importance of Human Management Control System

The control function is becoming increasingly important in today's organisations for several reasons. These reasons include the need for accountability, the necessity to detect environmental changes that can significantly impact organisations, the growing complexity of modern organisations, and the need to identify operational errors to prevent excessive costs (Ghosh, 2005). Controlling is crucial for managers to detect irregularities, identify opportunities, navigate complex situations, decentralise authority, reduce costs, and manage uncertainty.

Every organisation, whether large, medium, or small, for-profit or nonprofit, exists to achieve specific goals. Achieving these goals is universally expected to be done with high performance. Reich (2011) emphasises that the ability of organisations to attract, develop, and retain a talented workforce will be a crucial factor in creating a high-performance organisation today and in the future. The desire for a high-performance organisation is a fundamental aspect of human resource management. While Reich refers to the future importance of human resource control systems, Sims (2002) clearly states that the long-term, sustained success of an organisation in today's dynamic and challenging

business environment requires a commitment from top management to design and implement human resource management programs focused on developing both high-performing employees and organisations.

It is important to note, as Chandramohan (2008) emphasises, that controlling involves checking, verifying, and regulating processes to ensure that everything aligns with the adopted plans and provided instructions. Chandramohan (2008) emphasises that within the management process, which includes all the M's—money, markets, materials, machines, and men, the management of people is the most fundamental, dynamic, and challenging task. It is the people, not the machines, materials, money, or markets, who shape the organisation. Therefore, human resource management, particularly the control of human resources, is crucial for achieving effective results. It plays a vital role in gaining commitment and winning the cooperation of employees to successfully accomplish all desired goals (Chandramohan, 2008).

Methods of Human Management Control

There are many reasons and factors that require control, and correspondingly, there are various methods to achieve these goals. When considering methods, it is wise to combine different methodologies to obtain more accurate and satisfying results. One control method is supervision, which involves day-to-day scheduling, observations, and oversight of work. This process may not always be formally planned; it often takes shape based on the supervisor's initiative (Suttle, 2016). Another method involves leadership, which utilises formal appointments to empower leaders to fulfil responsibilities and influence the behaviour of individuals in order to achieve organisational goals. In addition, ad hoc control techniques can be employed. This method involves setting up committees to address specific issues, such as discipline, performance management, or budget allocations. These committees oversee particular human resource matters and make recommendations aligned with the organisation's objectives (Suttle, 2016).

Organisational structure is another tool that top managers can use to control workflow and performance. Executives aim to generate organisational frameworks that best suit organisational needs. Some opt for company structures based on numerous functions, such as finance, engineering, and, marketing. Organisations with functional structures often maximise the

efficient use of their resources. A leader may implement a product-based institutional structure to develop the quality of their institutional output. Additionally, those who adopt a customer-focused organisational structure may achieve better control over meeting customer needs (Suttle, 2016).

Human Control and Organogram

A well-designed organogram can significantly enhance the control of human resources within an organisation, particularly in a church setting. Several suggestions have been made regarding what constitutes a good organogram. An organisational chart allows managers to understand the positions of staff within the organisation and clarify the lines of responsibility. Furthermore, it illustrates how each department fits into the overall structure of the organisation (Baker, 2000).

Chandan and Sengupta (2011) emphasise six key points that contribute to a functional organogram, which are depicted in the below.

1. Work Specialisation refers to the division of labor. Rather than having one person complete an entire job, the tasks are divided into smaller steps, with each step performed by a different individual. Key characteristics of work specialisation include increased skills and efficiency among employees, as well as higher overall productivity.
2. Departmentalisation involves grouping jobs in a way that helps accomplish organisational goals. This can be done based on the homogeneity of tasks (functional departmentalisation), product lines (product departmentalisation), or on geographic or territorial bases (geographic departmentalisation).
3. Chain of Command demonstrates the flow of authority from higher levels to lower levels within the organization and clarifies reporting relationships. This concept consists of three key components:
 - a. Authority: the right to issue orders and expect compliance.
 - b. Responsibility: the duty to accomplish assigned duties.

- c. Unity of Command: ensuring that employees report to only one authority figure.
- 4. Span of Control: Denotes a number of staff a manager can efficiently oversee. There are two types of span of control:
 - a. Wider span of control: involves fewer levels of management where each manager supervises a larger number of employees.
 - b. Narrow span of control: consists of more management levels, where each manager oversees a limited number of subordinates.
- 5. Centralisation and Decentralisation: The level of decision-making authority within an organisation can indicate whether it is centralised or decentralised. Centralisation occurs when top management makes key decisions without considering input from lower-level employees. Conversely, decentralisation allows lower-level employees to participate in decision-making and exercise greater discretion.
- 6. Formalisation: Describes how employees are governed by rules, regulations, and standardised operating procedures. In organisations with high formalisation, there are clear job descriptions, numerous rules, and well-defined procedures that direct work processes.

By considering these elements, organisations can create effective organograms that facilitate better management and clearer communication.

Human Control and Politics

Even the most meticulously crafted human resource strategies can be impacted by external and internal changes at any time. Therefore, effective forecasting and flexibility are crucial for successful planning and adaptation. To achieve this, HR managers need to stay informed about developments within the company, the industry, and the broader market regarding the factors that drive change (Dillon, 2016).

Changes in local public opinion or political disagreements, particularly in Kenya where coalition governments rarely agree, can significantly affect funding availability. Factors such as general elections or the emergence of a new industrial superpower in the market also play a role. Politics influences various aspects, including the amount of tax to be paid, minimum wage rates, market regulations, and the excellence and number of personnel open for hire. This political environment has profound implications for the church, as funding is essential for completing church projects and paying staff. It also affects the caliber of staff that the church can recruit for its payroll.

Some administrations are frequently overturned by military coups, while tyrants and autocrats who leverage the opportunity they have to force global companies to purchase goods and services from businesses possessed or managed by the leaders or their associates lead others. In certain regions, one-party rule has resulted in widespread corruption, while in others, the constant change in government is due to the presence of numerous political parties, (Dillon, 2016).

When planning, the church needs to deliberate on the potential changes in budgets, markets, availability of suitable applicants and the potential, recent or anticipated political influences. For example, Kenya is scheduled to hold elections in 2027, so it is important to understand the new administration's priorities regarding markets, industries, businesses, and even religious affiliations.

Human Control and Legal Matters

HR laws and regulations differ significantly across countries in both nature and specifics. In many Western European nations, regulations governing employment and labour unions make it challenging to decrease the workforce. This is often due to the substantial payments required to terminate employees, which can hinder an organisation's ability to downsize effectively. In Kenya in particular, some laws address issues such as employment discrimination and sexual harassment. In others, because of religious or ethical differences, employment discrimination may be an accepted practice (whatishumanresource, 2012).

The church needs to reflect on these things very closely because the time when the church could act in ignorance of the state demands is gone. The time when pastors could be laid off without compensation is far-gone. All actions to the employee will be subjected to close scrutiny in relation to the government's legal demands.

All of these factors reveal that it is crucial for HR professionals to conduct a comprehensive review of employment-related laws before engaging in an administrative decision within any organisation. The role and nature of labour unions should be a part of that review (whatishumanresource , 2012). Perhaps it is time for the church to start thinking of unions like pastors' union and other staff unions and seek for their registration with the government for security of their job and alignment of the pastoral or church work to the basic legal demands of a country.

Cultural Influences on Human Resource Controls

Cultural aspects are intricate for HR professionals to manage. Over the years, many newer ways have emerged in the HR field to address organisational culture. AIC Nakuru Town Region is cosmopolitan, hence people from different cultures are hired which creates diversity. Mismanagement of diversity can cause great damage to the church just like any organisation, as MacKay (2005) points out.

MacKay (2005) asserts that every organisation has an exclusive ethos, and employees typically adapt to the same. He also emphasises the centrality of moral behaviour concerning cultural values. As a result, it has become a common practice in HR to develop a code of ethics for the workplace, which all employees are required to read, sign, and adhere to. Meshksar (2012) adds that, in today's era of globalisation, the influence of cultural factors on HR practices is significant and cannot be overlooked. Meshksar utilises Hofstede's model to examine how cultural factors affect HR practices. His finding asserts that while culture plays a crucial role in reshaping many HR practices, the redesign of these practices is not solely dependent on cultural factors. Hofstede's (1984) analysis also takes into account political, socioeconomic, and legal factors, as well as technological factors. Meshksar (2012) resolved that in countries with high power distance, decision processes related to recruitment, selection, training, and development, as well as pay and benefits,

are centralised. Additionally, it was found that in nations with a collectivist culture, appointments are primarily conducted internally within organisations. In contrast, in individualistic nations, the contracting process typically involves external sources, such as hiring agencies, advertisements, and colleges.

Like no other time in history, the church needs to up their game as far as the care for cultural diversity is concerned. It is unfortunate that some churches are still led within the spectrum of the senior pastor's culture; hence, others who may not necessarily be of that culture are left to be adopted into the practice of that leader.

Impacts of Technological Factors on Human Resource Control System

Technological advancements are affecting all areas of life. Its influence is evident in almost all sectors. For instance, businesses have evolved from an industrial framework to an information technology landscape (Ensher et al., 2002).

Johnson and Gueutal (2011) investigated the effect of information technology (IT) on HR functions and found that IT positively influences HR management. Their study highlighted that IT has altered HR management to a more strategic approach. Additionally, it established that the application of IT in HR has brought about effectiveness and efficiency. Their study emphasised the importance of technology in HR management and practices, with a call for HR professionals to not only excel in HR skills but also to be proficient in leveraging technology to apply those skills effectively in today's advanced technological era.

Ramirez (2007) investigated the impact of technology on HR practices using a neo-contingency approach and found that technology has significantly reshaped HR phenomenon in business. According to MacKay (2005), information technology has improved the efficiency of the hiring process. Today, online recruitment is prevalent, with the exception of most churches in Kenya. In the past, companies would advertise open positions and invite applications through traditional means. As a result, numerous applications were submitted in hard copy, requiring manual processing. In contrast, many companies now offer online application forms that automatically filter

applicant information based on specific criteria, ensuring that only candidates who meet the job requirements are considered.

Methodology and Findings

This study adopted a qualitative approach to explore the challenges faced in the administration of HR control system in the AIC Nakuru Town region. By using this approach, the study gains an understanding of underlying reasons, opinions, and motivations behind human resource management control systems and how they provide insights into the problem (Wood, 1998). The population of this study were the pastor and support staff of the eleven local churches of the AIC Nakuru Town Region.

Table 1: Target Population

Church	Pastor(s)	Support Staff	Total
AIC Shabab	4	8	12
AIC Section 58	4	10	14
AIC Milimani	2	4	6
AIC Bondeni	2	10	12
AIC Barut	2	9	11
AIC Crater	1	2	3
AIC Workers	2	2	4

AIC Parkview	1	10	11
AIC Lalwet	1	1	2
AIC Nakuru Town Centre	1	0	1
Total number per group	20	56	76

Response rate

The researcher administered 64 questionnaires to the respondents of which 60 of them were returned, for a response rate of 93%.

Table 2: Response Rate

Respondents	Administered	Returned	No response	Percentage return rate
Pastors	20	18	2	90%
Support Staff	56	52	3	95%
TOTAL	76	71	5	100%

The table below summarises the responses on the issuance of HR documents to new employees.

Table 3: Documents issued upon appointment

Document	Yes	No
Appointment letter:	66%	44%
Job Description:	52%	48%
Church vision & mission statement	12%	88%
Policy manual	10%	90%
Organizational Structure	18%	82%
Copy of Code of Conduct Forms	35%	65%

Human Resource Control Systems

Respondents were asked to state their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1), agree (2), neutral (3), disagree (4), to strongly disagree (5) to the following statements about HR control systems.

Table 4: Human resource control systems

Statement	SA(1)	A(2)	N(3)	D(4)	SD (5)
I know what a system of control is	7.9%	16%	16%	31%	29.1%

I know there is a system of control in our church	39%	30.8%	0%	21.2%	9%
My supervisor always refers to a document when evaluating my performance	13%	17%	7.5%	20.5%	42 %
The standard expected of me are very clear	28 %	23%	12%	10%	27%
The control procedures were well communicated to me on the start of my engagement	10%	19%	13%	25%	33%
I know our church's goal	34%	19%	15%	15%	18%
There is an established standard for my work	29%	20.8	14%	11.2%	25%

A majority (60.1%) of the respondents disagreed with the item "I know what a system of control is". However another majority (69.8%) of the respondents agreed with the item "I know there is a system of control in our church". This discrepancy could be attributed to the majority not understanding that a particular control method is actually part of the control system. Another 42% of the total sampled respondents disagreed with the item "My supervisor always refers to a document when evaluating my performance". On the statement "the standard expected of me are very clear", only 51% of the respondents agreed. A slightly larger majority, 58%, agree that "The control procedures were well communicated to me on the start of my engagement". Another majority (58%) of the respondents disagreed with the statement "The control procedures were well communicated to me on the start of my engagement". Finally only a small majority (51%) and of the

respondents seemed to know their church's goal and (49.8%) agreed that there is an established standard for their work.

The importance of HR control systems has been urged by other previous studies such as Haimann (1974), who observed that one critical place of control is to certify that all things occurs in conventionalities with the principles. He further held that a scientific system of control helps predict deviations before they occur. Controlling is therefore defined as the procedure of examining whether advancement is made toward the purposes and aims, and taking action if it is essential to make right any deviations.

Akrani (2011) equally asserted that the supervisor gets first-hand information, and he has better understanding with the workers. It also noted by Chandramohan (2008) that controlling infers to checking, authenticating and modifying to ensure that everything occurs in conformity with the plans adopted and the instructions given. Chandramohan (2008) further found that HR management and especially control of human resources gains utmost importance in obtaining effective results through people at work and in gaining the commitment as well as winning their willing cooperation for successful accomplishment of all desired goals.

Challenges Faced in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems

To identify the challenges that pastors, elders, women leaders who are not pastors but leaders of women committees, youth leaders, and the support staff face in the administration of the HR control systems in AIC Nakuru Town region, respondents were asked to respond the following statements with the same Likert scale.

Table 5: Challenges in the administration of the HR control systems

Statement	SA(1)	A(2)	N(3)	D(4)	SD (5)
We have a tool to evaluate our performance after a period of time	13%	10%	5%	35%	37%
I always enjoy the evaluation of my performance	25%	33%	13%	10%	19%
I work well with my supervisor	30 %	44%	10%	4%	12%
My supervision matches the initial instruction	14%	24%	5%	31%	26%
Pastors work very well with their staff	25%	40%	13%	3%	19%
There is a very good relationship between the elders, lady leaders, youth leaders, the staff and the pastor {s}.	47%	16 %	11%	16%	10%
The senior pastor and other pastors don't get along very well in our church	25%	25 %	12 %	28%	10%
I love my service in this church and would love to continue serving here.	18 %	23 %	23%	13%	23%

The relationship between workers in this church is great	34%	29%	1%	15%	21%
Corrective actions always match the standards set for my responsibility.	20 %	19%	11 %	13%	37%

A majority (72%) of the respondents disagreed that “We have a tool to evaluate our performance after a period of time”. Another majority (58%) of the respondents, however, agreed with the statement that “I always enjoy the evaluation of my performance”. On whether the respondents work well with their supervisor, a majority (77%) agreed. Further, only 57% of the respondents disagreed with the item “My supervision matches the initial instruction”. Another majority (65%) equally agreed with statement that “Pastors works very well with their staff.

Although 63% of the respondents agreed that there is a very good relationship between the elders, women leaders, youth leaders, the staff and the pastor(s), 50% agreed that “the senior pastor and other pastors don’t get along very well in our church”. This can be explained by the fact that pastors and the senior pastors are all employees unlike the elders, women leaders and youth leaders hence there is some tension between the pastors.

Furthermore, 23% of the respondents were neutral on the statement “I love my service in this church and would love to continue serving here”; while a majority (63%) of the respondents agreed that “The relationship between workers in this church is great”. Half (50%) of respondents disagreed with the statement “Corrective actions always match the standards set for my responsibility”

The findings agree with previous studies. Flamboltz (1996) observed that to help gain control over people’s behaviour in a formal organisation, most enterprises use a mixture of techniques including personal supervision, rules, standard operating procedures, job descriptions, budgets, accounting measurements, and performance appraisal systems. A leader may introduce a

gap in an institutional structure to boost the value of his organization's products. Those who employ structure that is more customer friendly may have better control over attaining the requirements of their customers (Suttle, 2016).

Solutions to the Challenges in the Administration of HRCS

Finally, the study sought to explore solutions to the challenges faced in the administration of HR control systems in AIC Nakuru Town Region. Again, respondents' agreement or disagreement with various possible solutions were measured on a Likert scale.

Table 6: Solutions to the challenges in the administration of HR control systems

Statement	SA(1)	A(2)	N(3)	D(4)	SD (5)
I would love to see a change in the way staff are being controlled in our church	24%	33%	5%	21%	17%
Our church needs education on how to control the human resource	50%	29%	3%	15%	3%
If good controls were in our church things would have been better	44%	22%	0%	30.0%	4%
I believe control human resource should not be the work of one person but inscribed in a system	59.8	19%	1.1%	2.1%	18%

A majority (57%) of the total sampled respondents would love to see a change in the way staff is being controlled in their church. Another majority (79%) also

agreed that their church needs education on how to control the human resource. Further the majority of respondents (66%) agreed that “If good controls were in our church things would have been better” while another majority (78.8%) finally agreed that they believe control human resource should not be the work of one person but inscribed in a system. Flamboltz (1996) observed that a good control system of any resource in an organisation need to be focused on the goal and not just on a personal thinking of the top management.

All organisations whether in business, academic institutions, government, or hospitals are anxious with directing human energies to the accomplishment of organisational objectives. Flamboltz (1996) further contends that to help in gaining control over the conduct of individuals in an organisation, most enterprises use a combination of techniques including personal supervision, standard operating procedures, rules, budget, descriptions, performance appraisal systems, and accounting measurements.

The assertion by Suttle (2016) that “Managers must measure actual performance to determine any variations from standard” is significant in this study. He further found that management in advance through procedures, policies and, practices, could set corrective actions. Some corrective may just happen automatically, while others may have to take exception to established policy, procedure, or practices. Ray (2008) contends that ratio analysis helps to understand the profitability, liquidity and solvency position of the business, while Ray (2008) asserted the importance of planning saying, “Planning is one of the functions of management and this involves the process of defining goals, establishing strategies, developing plans to integrate and coordinate activities”.

Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations

Human Resource Control Systems Used

The study found that most respondents received an appointment letter and a job description upon being hired. However, a significant number were not familiar with important control systems, such as the church's vision and mission statement (88%), the policy manual (90%), the Organisational structure (82%), and a copy of all code of conduct forms (65%). Additionally, it

was discovered that 60.1% of the respondents did not know what a system of control is. Furthermore, supervisors did not refer to any documents when evaluating performance, even though the standards expected of the appointees were clearly outlined. While most control procedures were well communicated to employees at the beginning of their engagement, only 34% of respondents were aware of their church's goals and 29% agreed that there are established standards for their work.

Challenges in Administration of Human Resource Control Systems

The study identified several major challenges in the administration of HR control systems. A significant (72%) of respondents highlighted the lack of a performance evaluation tool as a key issue, attributing it to a general ignorance of the church's vision and mission. Additionally, 58% of respondents noted that the senior pastor and other pastors do not have a good working relationship within the church. Moreover, many leaders expressed a lack of passion for their roles, with only 50% of the corrective actions aligning with the established standards for responsibility. This misalignment makes it difficult to effectively implement control measures, even when they are communicated clearly.

Solutions in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems

Finally, the study established some solutions to mitigate the challenges in the administration of the various HR control systems. These included change in the way staff are being controlled in their church, education on how to control human resources, implementation of good controls, and ensuring that control of human resources should be inscribed in a system and not the work of an individual.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Churches have not developed effective human resource control systems, which include supervisory methods, leadership policies, and organisational structures. The absence of important documents, such as a code of ethical conduct, and a lack of understanding regarding the relationship between ministry and organisational structure indicate that managing human resources will be a challenge. Most churches face significant challenges in administering various HR control systems. These challenges include inadequate job

supervision, an unclear church vision and mission, and conflicts among department leaders and the pastoral team. To facilitate effective administration of HR control systems several control measures should be implemented. These measures include assessing staffing procedures, providing education on how to manage human resources effectively, and ensuring that human resource management is integrated into a systematic approach rather than relying on individual decisions.

This study recommends several things from the study findings:

1. Morality and relationships

The church should serve as the guardian of honesty, justice, and transparency. Elected leaders and administrators within the church must embrace and embody the teachings of God, particularly the message from Exodus 18:21: “Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe.” Church board members and leaders should have a deep reverence for God and uphold honesty. They must also delegate responsibilities appropriately and uphold professionalism in their ministry.

Additionally, the church should investigate why pastors maintain good relationships with staff members but struggle to build rapport with one another. God calls upon the church to recruit or elect workers or board members who possess a good attitude and wisdom. This aligns with the guidance found in Acts 6:3, which states, “Brothers and sisters choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them.” This reflects the principles of internal control, which require that church employees be both competent and trustworthy, especially regarding financial accountability.

2. Orientation and training

All appointees and church staff should receive proper orientation on organisational structures, vision, and mission, and be guided through the developed documents. The code of conduct and the consequences of breaching it must be clearly communicated to all employees and volunteers

by the top leadership. Church leaders should receive training on human resource control systems to enhance effective administration. The application of the identified solutions from the research should be incorporated, including training on control systems, systemising the control system, and refining staffing procedures.

3. Policy development

Top leadership, in consultation with management experts, should develop several engagement documents to establish effective control over human resources in their daily responsibilities. Churches should develop and integrate human resource control systems into their organisational structure to ensure consistency and foster a sense of ownership among all stakeholders. A policy for volunteer church leaders should be developed to ensure that all church workers are managed effectively to achieve results.

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Woldetsadik, MK 2025, Review of Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove?, Dogara I Manomi In: *Going the Extra Mile: Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler*, M.R. Gunda, K. Gies, E.Chitando, J. Hock and L. Janneck (eds.), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 242-245

Review

Manomi, Dogara I, Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove? In: M.R. Gunda, K. Gies, E.Chitando, J. Hock and L. Janneck (eds.), *Going the Extra Mile: Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler*. University of Bamberg Press, Bamberg, 2024, pp. 67-96. ISBN 9783989890121.

Reviewed by Melesse K. Woldetsadik¹

This review focuses on a particular contribution to *Going the Extra Mile*, the forty-second volume in the University of Bamberg's Bible in Africa series: Dogara I. Manomi's chapter on African biblical hermeneutics. In his critique of Elizabeth W. Mburu's seminal *African Hermeneutics* (Carlise: Hippo Books, 2019), Manomi, a lecturer at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria, introduces a three-stone cooking stove model as an alternative to Mburu's four-legged stool. Manomi outlines three essential tasks within African hermeneutics: the analytical, the performative, and the transformative. He puts cultural analysis under the analytical task. For Manomi, cultural analysis is not as significant as it is for Mburu.

Manomi posits that studying the Bible in Africa requires an evangelical presupposition. This aligns with Mburu's approach to the biblical text through a hermeneutic of trust and accountability to the text and the African context. It honours the author's intended meaning while allowing for diverse applications. It recognises the Bible's transformative power amid its complex history of colonialism and patriarchy to address Africa's situation while remaining faithful to the text's meaning.

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Manomi aptly acknowledges Mburu's four-legged stool model as important for understanding African biblical hermeneutics, particularly in addressing the gap between spiritual beliefs and the realities of everyday life in Africa. He concurs with Mburu that the disconnect stems from the uncritical adoption of Western interpretations, which frequently overlook local contexts. In response to this dichotomy, Mburu advocates a hermeneutical approach rooted in African communities' lived experiences and cultural backgrounds, making biblical interpretation more pertinent to their daily lives.

Manomi, however, argues that his model is a better metaphor than Mburu's four-legged stool, as it emphasises communal participation in biblical interpretation and the critical role of interpreters in providing relevant insights. He likens the collaborative nature of the cooking stove—where firewood pieces converge to cook a meal—to the eight specific interpretative tasks that yield a comprehensive biblical interpretation: cultural analysis, textual analysis, synthetic analysis, appropriative analysis, performance of Scripture, performance education, identification and description of transformation, and identifying interpretation.

Interestingly, both Manomi and Mburu approach their discussions from an African perspective, yet they employ different hermeneutical methods. Mburu contends that her approach enhances the understanding of biblical texts by drawing parallels between African contexts and biblical narratives. Manomi contends that drawing such parallels before undertaking a hermeneutical process to determine the texts' meaning is premature. He argues that a thorough literary analysis should precede the theological context to avoid hasty conclusions. Manomi also critiques Mburu's method for relying on unexamined assumptions and prioritising broader contexts at the expense of specific passages. He argues that African readers tend to focus on particular sections rather than overarching themes. Consequently, Manomi advocates for a theological approach that aligns more closely with specific biblical texts.

Manomi, however, praises Mburu's view that while each text has a singular intended meaning, it can be applied in various ways today, and her differentiating between culture-bound truths, like the prohibition in Deuteronomy 22:11 (Do not wear cloths of wool and linen woven together), and universal truths, such as those in Exodus 20:1–17 (the Ten

Commandments). Manomi then introduces the hermeneutical method he calls "exegethics," which merges "exegesis" and "ethics" to highlight the ethical dimensions of biblical texts. This method involves three tasks: the analytical (cultural, textual, synthetic, and appropriative analysis), the performative (scriptural performance and evaluation), and the transformative (identifying transformation and assessing interpretive risks).

Manomi's approach provides a comprehensive overview through a hermeneutical lens, analysing existential and theological themes in the African context. His analysis encompasses historical-critical, linguistic, and theological issues, integrating both biblical and African perspectives. He connects analytical with performative aspects, exploring the impact of interpreted texts on individuals and society. Manomi highlights the dynamic role of Scripture in worship and religious practices, noting the positive and negative effects of Bible interpretation in various African contexts that shape spiritual experiences.

In conclusion, Manomi presents vital critiques regarding Mburu's hermeneutics, specifically challenging her sequencing and ordering of the hermeneutical process, specifically beginning with parallels between the African and biblical contexts, which he believes detracts from its effectiveness. He then introduces his multifaceted approach, which emphasises the cultural and performative dimensions of biblical interpretation. Furthermore, he emphasises the importance of understanding African traditional religion in the development of African biblical ethics. Manomi suggest adopting a more pragmatic approach to lessen the negative impact of social location, in contrast with Mburu's methodology, which seems to privilege social location. Manomi's shift aims to mitigate or qualify the influence of one's social location in biblical interpretation.

Unfortunately, Manomi does not sufficiently clarify his approach to transformative tasks. First, how can interpretation negatively impact the message if it aligns with the author's intended meaning? It is crucial to recognise that, regardless of cultural context, the Word of God possesses a definitive meaning that promotes godliness, even though its applications may differ. Second, the outcomes of this approach, as he asserts, are evaluated in terms of qualitative and quantitative growth within the church. However,

evangelical efforts are a gradual process that evolve and may not be readily evident within a single season. Yet, overall, Manomi provides a robust hermeneutical methodology grounded in the African context, offering a valuable contribution to the ongoing discourse.

Gashute, AS 2025, Review of *Identity Formation and the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading*, Tekalign Duguma Negewo, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 246-248

Review

Negewo, Tekalign Duguma, *Identity Formation and the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading*. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. ISBN 9783161617881, ix, 222 pp.

Reviewed by Abyot S. Gashute¹

Identify Formation and the Gospel of Matthew is a revision of Tekalign Duguma Negewo's doctoral dissertation. It consists of eight systematically organised chapters that present research gaps and questions, study methodology, thesis, supporting arguments, and key findings. The final chapter offers a summary of Negewo's argument and relevant recommendations for Matthean scholarship. The book also contains an exhaustive bibliography and an index of references, authors, and subjects.

Negewo's book focuses on the purpose of the gospel of Matthew. He contends that the primary purpose of the gospel's composition was to form the identity of an ideal reader's community in relation to embracing non-Judeans as part of the community of believers who share the messianic blessings. According to him, the ideal reader's community refers to 'the first century group of people who read, grasped, and accepted the ideology propagated by the gospel of Matthew as it was intended by the implied author in the narrative' (1). He further clarifies that this ideal reader's group is 'a new group of people as the reconstituted Israel' (1). Additionally, Negewo assumes the ideal reader's community to be 'a reflection of the existing community' (1). Though he also supposes that these are 'imagined/proposed communities (1). He argues that the gospel's characterisation and presentation of non-Judeans, both positively and negatively, represent the author's narrative strategy for shaping the identity of the ideal reader's community, rather than reflecting an actual

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historical tension between Judeans and non-Judeans. After narrating the history of research and describing his methodology in chapters 1 and 2, Negewo dedicates five chapters (chs. 3–7) to demonstrating his argument that the author's inclusion of non-Judean characters functions to shape the identity of the ideal reader's community.

In chapter 1, by reviewing and assessing previous research on Matthew, Negewo identifies the lack of sufficient study 'to determine the role of the text in constructing the ideal identity of the society to which the gospel was addressed' (38). In chapter 2, he describes his methodology as a socio-narrative reading of the gospels. This methodology employs 'an integrated approach that links socio-scientific criticism and narrative criticism through myth-making and social identity formation theories' (38). In subsequent chapters, Negewo applies the methodology introduced in chapter 2.

In chapter 3, Negewo discusses the negatively stereotyped non-Judean individuals in the Matthean narrative, such as 'the stereotypically negative depiction of non-Judeans in Jesus' teaching' (71), including the Gadarenes (Matt 8:28–34), Pilate (Matt 27:1–26; 27:62–66), and the Roman soldiers (Matt 27:27–28:15). Negewo argues that the author uses these negatively portrayed non-Judeans as a strategy 'to construct the identity of the ideal reader's community' (88). In chapter 4, he discusses 'how the author used the positively characterised non-Judeans to form the identity of the ideal reader's community' (88). Here, Negewo primarily examines the identity-forming role of the inclusion of four non-Judeans in Matthew's genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah. In chapters 5, 6, and 7, he explores the identity-forming function of the inclusion of stories of other non-Judean representatives in the Gospel narrative: the journey of the Magi (Matt 2:1–12), the healing of the centurion's servant (Matt 8:5–13), and the healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt 15:21–28). In Chapter 8, Negewo summarises his key findings and offers recommendations for further Matthean studies, specifically addressing 'other aspects of identity formation, namely the role of Judean figures in the Matthean narrative in forming the identity of the ideal reader's community' (194).

Negewo emphasises that the inclusion of non-Judean characters in the Gospel narrative does not reflect a historical conflict and tension between Judeans

and non-Judeans. Rather, it serves to shape the identity of the ideal reader's community, which consists of both Judeans and non-Judeans. However, this raises further questions regarding whether historical tensions between Judeans and non-Judeans might, in fact, have prompted the author of Matthew to include these figures—both positively and negatively—in order to promote the vision of an ideal community of God's people comprised of both groups. By emphasising the inclusion of non-Judean characters in the Gospel narrative as the implied author's literary strategy to shape the identity of the ideal reader's community, Negewo overlooks the historical tension that existed between Judeans and non-Judeans. Broadhead arrives at a similar conclusion and observes: 'Like most Matthean scholars, [Negewo] fails to account for the dramatic tensions and contradictions that flow through the larger narrative. As with most scholars, his concern to diminish this tension and to credit it to some literary and theological design of a singular author is built upon presumptions brought to the text.'² Even so, I believe Negewo has made a significant scholarly contribution to Matthean studies. I particularly recommend this book to scholars and students of Matthean studies and New Testament studies more broadly.

²Edwin K. Broadhead, 2005, Review of "Identity Formation and the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading," *Review of Biblical Literature* 02, p. 3.

Akano, BI 2025, Review of *Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews*, Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Linder P. Saunders (eds), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 249-252

Review

Urga, Abeneazer, Edward L. Smither & Linder P. Saunders (eds). *Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews*. William Carey Publishing, Pasadena, 2023. ISBN: 9780878084556, 213 pp.

Reviewed by Benjamin Isola Akano¹

Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews is a giant stride forward in scholarship on the book of Hebrews. As the editors rightly posit in the preface, most scholars limit their discussion of Hebrews to its being a message directed solely at strengthening believers to remain in the faith amid life's challenges. While the contributors did not deny this, they argue further that the book is ultimately missiologically inclined. It fits perfectly into the *missio Dei* purpose of the Bible's metanarrative.

The volume's first part focuses on the the missionary motive of Hebrews. Here Matthew A. Bennet, Linda Saunders, Allen Yeh, and Michael P. Naylor describe Hebrews as a theological exposé about God's supreme sacrifice and the work of Jesus' atonement in the metanarrative of *missio Dei*. The description of Christ as the exact replica of God and as the lineage of Abraham qualified him to uniquely fulfil God's perfect mission. In part two, Edward L. Smither, Jessica A. Udall, and Irwyn Ince discuss the missionary message of Hebrews, putting Christ at its centre. Believers are to hold fast to their faith and to live as pilgrims in a storm-tossed transitory world as they fulfil their missional purpose, "expectantly waiting to receive the full and glorious inheritance that is theirs in Jesus Christ".

¹ Benjamin Akano lectures in the Department of Intercultural Studies, The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomoso.

In the volume's third section, Abeneazer G. Urga, Sigurd Grindheim, Jessica N. Janvier, and Sarah Lunsford consider the missionary methods of Hebrews. They agree that proclamation is a central communication dynamic in Hebrews. The importance of contextualisation is also obvious. The contributors also identify Hebrews' framework for both converting the unsaved and establishing believers in authentic Christlikeness. In the volume's final part, Robert L. Gallagher uses three hermeneutical lenses—interpreting the metanarrative, understanding Hebrews, and exploring mission—to assess the contributions within the volume. He acknowledges the hermeneutical fidelity and diversity of contributions.

In all, *Reading Hebrews Missiologically* addresses a critical issue: the book of Hebrews, like all other biblical books, is integral to the *missio Dei* purpose of the Bible, and should be read with that in mind. The volume's emphases on the supremacy of Christ and on the exclusive nature of the Christian faith in a multi-religious context are foremost missiological motifs. Its Christological contribution to missiology, especially in part one, is profound as it emphasises that God as the initiator of the salvific program establishes Christian missions in *missio Dei*. Furthermore, the volume also demonstrates that proclamation is critical in missions, noting that Hebrews has a clear theology of missions that prioritises proclamation among other activities. Sequel to vocalising the gospel, it also identifies the need for the hearers to exercise their faith. These are critical in missiology and in agreement with Romans 10:17. The book's identification of Hebrews' framework demonstrate its harmony with the two key parts of the Great Commission mandate, namely: baptising and teaching to obey everything Jesus has commanded.

A careful reading of *Reading Hebrews Missiologically* shows an emphasis on contextualisation, a core motif in missiology. The contributors link the missiological motif of Hebrews with some contextual issues that serve as reminders for stakeholders of missions. These include Janvier's reference to narrative style of proclamation, Smither's focus on *philoxenia*, Grindheim's "missiology of weakness," and Yeh's focus on mission to the margin. The missional community has a time-bound purpose to proclaim the exclusive faith everywhere people are, offering hope now while looking forward to an eschatological hope that will be fully realised later. However, Grindheim's reference to 'power' needs a balance with Paul's idea that gospel is 'power of

God' in Romans 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 1:18, 24. Truly, the effective witness of the church is through the principle of incarnation, but Grindheim's use of power focuses more on the Western wealth against the poverty in the mission field. The use of 'power,' especially with the section titled 'Mission and Power', makes some Christians from the Majority World think of the gospel or Pentecostal power to confront diabolical power in their contexts.

Lunsford's tactical balance between reproducibility and maturity is commendable, especially in light of the current discourse on the church planting movement, especially through disciple making movement. Lunsford shows that Hebrews demonstrates the need and strategies for reproducible discipleship. Hebrews does not encourage a rush for quantity and multiplication at the expense of quality because infants cannot be placed in the role of elders. Further, the book shows that missions is both centripetal and centrifugal and that the missional community must seek to go after the people, whether they are close by or far away, to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19-20.

An obvious lacuna relates to an assumption about the definition for missions. As Gallagher rightly notes in his concluding assessment, each contributor could have briefly presented the understanding of Christian missions with which they were working. Better still, the volume could have included an introductory chapter that offered a clear definition of missions to which each contributor could have connected their discussion. Such introduction may have also catered for other terminologies, like church growth movement, diaspora missions, church planting movement, and disciple-making movement, which are implicitly referred to by the contributors.

Hermeneutically, Gallagher assessment, including his three lenses view, is commendable. However, if the volume had used a conventional outline of contents of the book of Hebrews, it would have impacted its contribution more. Such would have dealt with almost every section of the book. As it is, the contributors seems to have selected their themes randomly with no stated rationale. Further, though the contributors are from different backgrounds and experience, including Asia, North Africa, East Africa, and part of Europe a voice from West Africa would have added a flavour, considering the

contributions of Christians from that region to the development of global Christianity.

With an overall goal of drawing out the missiological motif of the book of Hebrews, this volume is suitable for theological educators, missionaries, and mission administrators, among other members of the missional community. Its key value is in the contributors' engagement of the message of the book of Hebrews with the practical realities of missions. They demonstrate how the book of Hebrews is useful in guiding the missional community to partner with the Triune God in *missio Dei*.

September, M 2025, Review of *Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of 1 Peter*, Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Jessica A. Udall (eds), *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 253-256

Review

Urga, Abeneazer, Edward L. Smither & Jessica A. Udall (eds), *Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of 1 Peter*. William Carey Publishing, Pasadena, 2024. ISBN: 9781645085850, 264 pp.

Reviewed by Marissa September¹

The authors who contributed to this work give incredible insight into the call for a missiological lens whilst reading 1 Peter. The authors not only engage the reader in the rich cultural history of the time but also provide a hermeneutical bridge which transports the audience to reconsider their understanding of 1 Peter simply as an epistle of exhortation. This book grants its audience an undeniable journey into adopting a missional praxis in every area of the Christian life. This missional understanding is applied to the Christian life despite our suffering, to our salvation, and toward the hope of seeing Christ again. Although this volume is about NT (1 Peter), the application thereof engages both Old and New Testaments in a manner which allows the audience to grapple with foundational teachings with the reassurance of a God who is faithful to keep His promise.

The contributors to this work all hold various degrees and display a great of interest in New Testament studies such as keen interests within missions, cultural studies, and are experts in their respective fields of study. Their unique insights are clearly articulated and edify an already richly saturated text with depth, clarity and an immense sense of understanding of that to which every believer is called. This allows for the audience to become easily engrossed in

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that which is presented and to truly reflect on the challenge of embracing an 'alien' identity with a missionary mindset to the glory of God.

The overarching theme of this book is a detailed look at the application of missiology to 1 Peter and how this impacts our current understanding of the Christian mission in light of God's word. The book is arranged in 3 sections. Each address and challenges critical aspects of missiology. The authors in the various sections address 1 Peter engaging chapter and verse, with the primary focus being both God and Christ and the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New Testament. This undergirds the very premise that God's word is true. It was then, and it is now.

The first section focusses on different motives within a missiological framework, highlighting the why, who, and how of reading 1 Peter missiologically. Bowman focusses on salvation by engaging Peter's writings to the audience in which he reminds them that salvation has been prophesied throughout the Old Testament, navigating the conversation to a more present/contextualised understanding of salvation. A salvation that embraces suffering as part of our mission, as the joy of the believer is enveloped in the glory of the Father and the future hope of the believer in Christ. The relationship between Old Testament prophecy and the experience of the current audience is one which should result in both reflection on the past and introspection of one's faith currently. This engagement coupled with Belay's discussion of 'The Role of the Spirit in Mission' integrates the call for faith and its outworking in the life of the believer. Belay's discussion ties together salvation, the work of the Spirit, and the empowerment of the Spirit in the life of the believer to carry out Christ's mandate set forth in Matthew 28:19-20.

The engagement of the text in section 1 really highlights the believer's response to God's call in 1 Peter which is a call to salvation, imitation, and proclamation.

Section 2 demonstrates the mission in various aspects, with an exhortation to embrace the judgement of salvation as Klausli explores the very rich history of God's plan for the redemption of mankind. Navigating this discussion Klausli pays great attention to the promises of the Old Testament and their fulfilment in the New Testament through the Messiah. This paints a picture of the

suffering believer as one who stands victorious, having been chosen by God. The assertion that believers are sojourners, reinforces the idea of being separate from the world, called to holiness, submission to God, and persecution. This prepares believers to continue in their witness, because even though called to be separate from the world, the goal must always be to proclaim God's Gospel to the world.

Gaisie ties this section together beautifully by investigating the idea of ancestors in the current African context and explaining how Christ supersedes that ideology. He argues for the need for an Ancestor Christology in Africa; however, one must consider the implications thereof if read and applied incorrectly. Gaisie's arguments are thorough and offer great insight regarding death and life and how both find their origin—both physically and spiritually—in God. Gaisie's depiction of Jesus' resurrection offers an ancestral Christology for the Akan tradition of West Africa. This should be further explored within other African contexts such as IsiXhosa and Zulu of southern Africa. That would allow for wider reading into this interpretation and possible greater dialogue as to how all African tribes can read 1 Peter and have its application take root.

Section 3 is the climax of the book as it holds for every believer the mandate set forth for us by Christ. The call is to be missional in the very spaces we hold and especially toward migrants as Stephens so aptly documents in chapter 10. In relation to current world circumstances, this chapter is a necessary challenge to the universal church to live out their faith in a manner that matters. The engagement of the discussion around hospitality is thought provoking and creates a natural discussion with Brooks' argument that evangelism is corporate and involves the whole church. As sojourners ourselves, we are mandated to bear witness to the Messiah, and as His people, we are called to a life which is God glorifying.

The authors have achieved their goal. This book offers a contextualised look at 1 Peter, offering both theoretical and practical applications for a missional outlook. The volume is a great scholarly work and will enlighten readers on how a missiological outlook from an epistle could spur the church to be a greater vessel of the Gospel. To have an in-depth cultural and contextual analysis inform our praxis is what is necessary to spur believers on. We must remember that before we are sent, we are called. This book holds great insight

for those who have a keen desire to study NT literature, understand the call to missional application of the Epistles, and especially pastors/church leaders who want to encourage the church to be bold in the mission for Christ.

Kemigisha, S 2025, Review of *Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States*, Mahari Tedla Korcho, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 257-259

Review

Korcho, Mahari Tedla, *Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States*. Langham Academic, Carlisle, 2024, ISBN : 9781839738838, 242pp.

Reviewed by Susan Kemigisha¹

Mahari Tedla Korcho's *Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States* explores the missional potential of Ethiopian diaspora churches in the United States. The study identifies a significant research gap in studying missions from Ethiopian diaspora churches, particularly regarding intergenerational dynamics. Korcho highlights the importance of diaspora missiology, emphasising two wings: missions to and missions by or with diaspora communities.

The volume's literature review provides a comprehensive overview of diaspora missiology. It touches on theoretical frameworks, such as transnationalism, but could benefit from more in-depth discussion. The review exposes limitations and areas for further exploration. It focuses on diaspora churches in Western contexts. A more nuanced understanding of diverse contexts would enrich the discussion.

Korcho's work employs a robust methodology, utilising a case study approach with multiple sources of information. The triangulation of data sources enhances the validity and reliability of the findings. However, more details on the sampling strategy and data collection methods would strengthen the study.

¹ Susan Kemigisha is a PhD student at Atlantic International University.

The volume's discussion of intergenerational dynamics explores the challenges and opportunities arising from interactions between the younger or second (those born and raised in the diaspora, typically in their teens to early thirties) and older or first (emigrants from Ethiopia) generations. While the discussion demonstrates a detailed understanding of the Ethiopian diaspora experience, it relies heavily on stories from real life and personal observations. Incorporating more empirical research and diverse voices would strengthen this section.

Korcho's findings highlight the challenges faced by Ethiopian diaspora churches, including slow church growth and limited missions initiatives. His discussion on first-generation ministry reveals an inward-looking approach, while second-generation ministry is often limited to a specific age group.

His discussion of interactions across generational lines, highlights the need for greater openness and understanding between generations. Korcho's findings suggest that while the second generation may be interested in learning about their heritage, they are not necessarily interested in participating in their parents' ethnic church. Concrete recommendations for addressing these challenges would enhance the volume's practical relevance.

Korcho's work explores the possibility of Ethiopian diaspora churches in the US adopting a church structure that brings together the first and second generations for missions. The author posed three questions to participants to gauge their views on this matter. These included:

- (1) Can first and second-generation immigrants worship and engage in missions together within a single church structure? Do current church structures allow for intergenerational collaboration and unity, or are they a barrier to achieving this goal?
- (2) Is it necessary and possible for different generations to come together in a unified church structure?
- (3) What are potential benefits and challenges of an intergenerational approach?

The author's exploration of a unified church structure for Ethiopian diaspora churches raises crucial questions about intergenerational collaboration and language barriers. While participants' suggestions, such as joint services and dual-language services, offer potential solutions, they also underscore the complexities of reconciling cultural and linguistic differences between generations. A more nuanced analysis of these dynamics could provide valuable insights for churches facing similar challenges, highlighting the need for context-specific approaches that balance unity and diversity.

The study's findings have implications for church ministry and community engagement. By understanding the perspectives of different generations, church leaders can develop strategies to promote intergenerational relationships and create a more unified and effective ministry. The study also underscores the importance of contextualising church services to meet the needs of diverse congregations. By adopting flexible and innovative approaches, Ethiopian diaspora churches can better serve their communities and fulfil their mission.

Korcho's recommendations aim to encourage Ethiopian diaspora churches to engage in missions. They emphasise cultivation of a missional mindset, awareness creation, and training as essential. However, more specific and concrete examples of implementation would strengthen the recommendations.

Korcho's study sheds light on diaspora missiology and intergenerational dynamics within Ethiopian diaspora churches, offering valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities they face. Future studies could explore the impact of church division and develop strategies for bridging generational gaps. This study is a valuable resource for scholars, church leaders, and practitioners interested in diaspora missiology and intergenerational dynamics, providing a significant contribution to the field.

Amenyedzi, SB 2025, Review of *Critical Issues in Contemporary Church*, Samuel Tengey, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 260-262

Review

Tengey, Samuel, *Critical Issues in Contemporary Church*. Church Resource, Accra, 2017, ISBN: 9789988264864

Reviewed by Seyram B. Amenyedzi¹

Dr Samuel Tengey is the founder of Church Resource and GSR Consulting, which mainly equips the church through resources such as this book, consultations, and training. Having grown up as a minister's son, and based on his personal ministry experiences from a young age, Tengey identifies critical issues in the contemporary church globally, particularly in Africa. It is often assumed that because the church is a spiritual body, everything done there must have a spiritual approach. Tengey disagrees with this premise. While upholding spiritual values and approaches, the church is also an organisation that needs organisational and managerial skills to succeed.

Some of the critical issues the contemporary church is confronted with are church growth, unresolved conflicts, lack of organisational skills, backsliding, nominalism, recruitment of members from other churches, bad leadership, lack of customer care values (perhaps pastoral care would be a more suitable term), and the challenge of other religions, particularly Islam. Tengey is concerned about how sophisticated the nature of sin is becoming. Exacerbated by the media and the increased use of the internet, pornography and other unbiblical movements like homosexuality and feminism are coming to the doorsteps of almost everyone. As a feminist/womanist theologian myself, I wonder if the author does not lean toward patriarchal tendencies.

After foregrounding the pertinent issues confronting the contemporary church, Tengey proposes that the church needs strategic intelligence, which is the ability to strategically make the most of opportunities and to mitigate

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threats and unforeseen circumstances, to succeed. The church needs to enhance its managerial and organisational leadership skills by learning from the corporate world and other institutions to effectively operate. One cannot ignore the competitive nature of church and ministry. Hence, there is the demand for churches to find their niche and uniquely brand themselves if they are to survive.

Tengey proposes the following principles as vital to the success of the church: well-defined vision and mission statements; a statement of core values; strategy; and strategic planning based on a SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) analysis of internal factors identifying and revising relevant activities, policies, skills, values, and other variables accordingly. Furthermore, the church needs an appropriate structure in place. It must set ambitious targets and ensure that there is an excellent human resource system. Intensive training and development; a competent financial department; marketing/outreach and research; and intelligence units are all essential to the growth and success of the church. Tengey juxtaposes these organisational principles with biblical verses and principles, making them relevant and appropriate for a spiritual context.

Like industries, churches must identify their unique qualities and understand how they differ from others to remain relevant and to keep up with the competition. Tengey borrows concepts from the corporate world by adopting Porter's 5Force Analysis, which assists industries in understanding the forces and dynamics affecting their output. Tengey applies four of Porter's five forces to the church: (1) the threat of new entrants, (2) the power of buyers (members and how they can easily switch churches in contemporary times due to the availability of many options), (3) the availability of substitutes, which better explains the previous point (the power of media and the internet even makes the options easily accessible), and (4) competitive rivalry, which may not be expected to exist in the spiritual setting but undoubtedly does exist.

In the current era of *customerism*, whereby the customer reigns, members leave when they are not satisfied. In terms of competitive rivalry, churches can respond in one of two ways: they can do nothing and expect God to deal spiritually with the situation, or they can escalate the level of competitiveness with counteracting activities. Tengey's framework provides the platform for

gaining industry-specific intelligence by in-depth analyses of the church's status and activities while asking very critical questions regarding specific programs and core values.

While Tengey urges churches to identify and maintain their well-branded and unique niches, it is imperative to pay particular attention to the theological and spiritual dimensions. A church's focus must be on their specific calling and not mimic others. Tengey calls for examination, evaluation, and revaluation of programs and activities. This will also call for research and surveys, which may sometimes render leadership vulnerable; nonetheless, this is very crucial for the growth of the church. . Tengey does well to identify the problems with the church, but he is too cautious in critiquing the kind of leadership training rendered at the seminaries, which might lie at the core of the critical issues. If pastors are trained to see the church as a spiritual entity, that is how they will approach church administration. While Tengey admonishes presbyters, church boards, and those in leadership to understand their role as supportive—they are not to control the pastor—what about pastors who disregard the wisdom and contribution of the laity, thinking that they alone must have the final say?

Tengey explores some critical issues for the church, mostly to do with organisation and “business”, but he neglects other critical issues, such as domestic abuse, the marginalisation of women, and exclusion of persons with disability. Even though the threat of the media is acknowledged, there are other dimensions within the social media space where members' privacy is compromised through live and uncensored transmission. This does not suggest that social media is bad, it can be fully utilised with discretion. God is somehow turned into a transactional God who needs a seed to multiply. Although the book is well written and structured, I find the use of Wikipedia as a reference source problematic.

Critical Issues in Contemporary Church is a must-read for pastors, especially those in Africa, and theological institutions should consider it for use as a textbook. The church indeed needs to look beyond spirituality and embrace organisational and managerial skills as proposed by Tengey to succeed.

Amenyedzi, SB 2025, Review of *Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth*, Samuel Tengey, *African Theological Journal for Church and Society*, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 263-266

Review

Tengey, Samuel, *Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth*. GSR Media, Accra, 2019, ISBN: 9789988295875

Reviewed by Seyram B. Amenyedzi¹

In his book *Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth*, Dr Samuel Tengey addresses key challenges in church growth, and provides strategies, systems, and resources for sustainability. Tengey is a prolific writer and consultant, who focuses mainly on resources to enhance the ministry and leadership of the church. He argues that, from a biblical viewpoint, the church is female, hence, it has the capacity to be pregnant, to give birth, and to nurture the growth of the baby. *Obstetrics of Church Growth* is about all that needs to be done for the church to ensure “its continued health, fertility, productivity, sustained reproductive capacity, and self-sustenance” (p xiv). The book is divided into three parts: re-evaluating the church growth discourse, capacity building, and church growth resources for leaders.

Tengey seeks to answer the question of whether numerical growth aligns with God’s will. He identifies two main schools of thought: one that prioritises spiritual growth over numerical growth, and the other that focuses solely on numerical growth. Tengey, however, proposes a third school of thought: *Qualito-quantitative* growth, which is a combination of both qualitative (spiritual) and quantitative (numerical) church growth. He argues that the church’s need for both qualitative and quantitative growth is modelled in Jesus’ patience and care when reaching out to the masses. Drawing from biblical stories of Moses and Jethro, Peter and his bumper fish harvest at Jesus’s word, and disputes in the early church, Tengey emphasises that no matter the level of spirituality in the church, numerical growth inevitably

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brings difficulties that must be dealt with tactfully and professionally with the right resources, training, and structures in place. He warns against clinging to outdated and informal structures, emphasising the need for church leadership to possess organisational and managerial skills, which he extensively addresses in his book *Critical Issues in Contemporary Church*.

Exploring the dimensions of spirituality and spiritual growth from theological perspectives, Tengey introduces *Spiritometrics*, a framework for measuring spiritual growth with indicators: behavioural metrics, character metrics, charismatic metrics, and, intimacy with God. These metrics focus on personal intimacy with God, discernment to the leading of the Holy Spirit, personal character in and outside of Christian communities, and relationships both in the church and the society at large. Though spirituality is sometimes difficult to measure, Tengey's indicators will enhance assessments of church activities and growth. Yet it would be beneficial if Tengey clarified the hierarchy of these dimensions. For example, he should have put intimacy with God first, as it produces the other fruits. That is the lesson of Jesus' story of the vine and branches in John 15. In this current digital age, fasting from devices and social media to enhance our spiritual focus should also be captured in Tengey's framework.

The book provides resources on capacity building for church growth, emphasising the urgency of the gospel and evangelism as the heartbeat of God, calling for a commitment to the Great Commission. It is worrying that most preachers seem to have left the actual message of remission of sin and repentance to focus on signs and wonders. Tengey writes about reaching and evangelising 'pagans'. The term 'pagan' is problematic: it is too restrictive. It does not include all people groups who need to be reached. A broader term like 'unbelievers' or non-Christians would be more inclusive. Since major religions are not usually categorised under paganism, one wonders where a religion like Islam would be positioned. In the theological context, a category for 'other religions' would be more appropriate. In providing practical strategies for outreach, prayer is notably missing from Tengey's lists, despite the crucial need for intercessory prayers for those we seek to evangelise. Tengey does, however, mention prayer in other sections.

Tengey further outlines methods of presenting the gospel, discipleship, and how to handle those who fail to accept Christ, highlighting the need for new converts to be assured of their salvation, understand who they are in Christ, and grow in their new faith. The acronym GROWTH represents the values and expectations of believers: Go to God daily in prayer; Read the Bible daily; Obey God in all things; Witness to Christ through life and words; Trust in God entirely; and Have the Holy Spirit dwell in you for daily victory. The book concludes with a proposed agenda for church growth and with strategies for church growth and discipleship. Tengey highlights the importance of developing believers as a foundation for church growth. His table that categorises community needs and tailor-make programs to attract non-believers merits attention.

While I find Tengey's book resourceful, a key omission is the relevance of culture in missions, especially in Africa and other parts of the world where traditional belief systems continue to shape daily life. Consideration of culture would lead Tengey to consider the relevance of contextualisation and inculturation, where the gospel is preached in a manner that critically addresses cultural issues. How do Christians navigate certain rituals and ceremonies that are embedded in their traditions and culture? Furthermore, understanding the dominant religion in a community is crucial to evangelism, but this is not captured as part of Tengey's strategies for growth, although it is mentioned elsewhere.

In the current digital era, there is also a dire need to consider relevant resources in the digital space, such as websites, social media platforms, software, hardware, and IT personnel, as relevant resources for church growth, but about these resources, Tengey is silent. He does not address disability, which reiterates the fact that disability is too-often an afterthought in the church. Additionally, Tengey's use of 'man' reflects a traditional patriarchal approach; adopting a more gender-inclusive term like 'humankind' would improve his text. Finally, the volume's structural consistency could be enhanced as some chapters have introductions and conclusions while others do not.

Despite these criticisms, Tengey's book *Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth* is a priceless asset, chiefly

for the African Church, which serves as its primary audience. The book portrays the church as a woman who needs care and nurturing to ensure both qualitative and quantitative growth. With the blend of academic and ministry insights, the book has the potential to serve as a textbook for seminaries, Bible colleges, and universities, and an invaluable resource for the church as a whole and its ministers.

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Contents

Re-Reading Matthew 1:3–6 in the Light of the Inclusion of Four Non-Israelite Women in Jesus' Genealogy by Motuma B. Amante	p. 1
Caesarea Philippi and Mark 8:27–35 as a Turning Point in the Discovery and Revelation of the Identity of Jesus Christ: Historical Linguistics Analysis by Paul Anyidoho & Randa El Chami.....	p. 28
Samaritan Compassion (Luke 10:25–37) and African Socioeconomic Problems by Abel A Alamu.....	p. 56
John Calvin's Biblicism and the Doctrine of the Trinity: a Constructive Retrieval for Theology, Ministry, and Social Witness by Charles N. K. Twumasi-Ankrah	p. 80
An African Christian Reflection on the Metaphorisation of the Church as Body by Isaac Boaheng	p. 101
Biblical Ethics, Children, and Youth in the African Church: Towards Transforming African Theology and the Role of Youth and Children in the Church by Richard O. Otiso	p. 121
Reimagining Bible Study as a Tool for Community Transformation in Informal Settlements by Otieno Oguok.....	p. 141
Church Leadership Capacity-building for Rural Community Development: Reflections from the AOG in Zimbabwe by Kimion Tagwirei	p. 166
The Responses of the Christian Church to Pandemics in Nigeria: a Historical Comparison of the 1918 Influenza and COVID-19 Pandemics by Oluwasegun P. Aluko.....	p. 190
Challenges and Solutions in the Administration of Human Resource Control Systems in Africa Inland Church: Nakuru Town Region by Awino L Odhiambo	p. 214
Review of Four-Legged Stool or Three-Stone Cooking Stove? (Dogara I Manomi) in: <i>Going the Extra Mile: Reflections on Biblical Studies in Africa and the Contributions of Joachim Kügler</i> , M.R. Gunda, et al. (eds.) by M.K. Woldetsadik	p. 242
Review of <i>Identity Formation and the Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Narrative Reading</i> (Tekalign Duguma Negewo) by A.S. Gashute.....	p. 246
Review of <i>Reading Hebrews Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of Hebrews</i> (eds. Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Linder P. Saunders) by B.I. Akano	p. 249
Review of <i>Reading 1 Peter Missiologically: The Missionary Motive, Message, and Methods of 1 Peter</i> (eds. Abeneazer Urga, Edward L. Smither & Jessica A. Udall) by M September	p. 253
Review of <i>Ethiopian Diaspora Churches on Mission: An Intergenerational Perspective on Ethiopian Churches in the United States</i> (Mahari Tedla Korcho) by S. Kemigisha	p. 257
Review of <i>Critical Issues in Contemporary Church</i> (Samuel Tengey) by S.B. Amenyedzi.....	p. 260
Review of <i>Obstetrics of Church Growth: Strategies, Systems & Resources for Church Growth</i> (Samuel Tengey) by S.B. Amenyedzi	p. 263

ATJCS is published by the Network for African Congregational Theology in conjunction with the Christian Literature Fund and Huguenote College



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