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Christian African emerging adults' epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible with particular reference to contextual evangelism

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Abstract

The primary objective of this paper was to demonstrate that among the emerging adults of Mamelodi, Gauteng, South Africa, there appears to be a perceived lack of comprehension of the epistemic authority of the Bible. It currently hinders the proclamation of the gospel in a significant and contextual manner, within a Charismatic, Catholic and Lutheran Church. The construal of Biblical authority is from a conservative evangelical perspective and does not purport to represent an ecumenical construal of such authority.

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher explored Christian African emerging adult's epistemic understanding of the Bible, focusing on contextual evangelism. Fifteen participants (eight males and seven females) from three different denominations (Catholic, Charismatic and Lutheran) participated in the study. The researcher conducts a case study to investigate her perception of a lack of understanding of the Bible's authority. The findings based on the interviews reveal a disturbing neglect in reading and understanding the Bible and applying biblical principles in participants' lives. This thesis concludes with a summary of a clearer understanding of the Bible's authority amongst emerging adults.

Introduction

In 2013, the South African Theological Seminary (SATS) conducted a self-reporting survey concerning Bible reading practices in South Africa (Smith 2013). Their objective was to determine whether Christians still read their Bibles, to what extent they do so, and if they still believed the Bible. The results indicate a very high commitment to Bible reading and that Christians apply biblical principles in their lives, believing in the authority of the Bible (Smith 2013:5). This survey is a realistic view of Bible literacy in South Africa considering 4,151 people responded (Smith 2013:5). However, there were concerns that as the age of participants decreased, their engagement with the Bible decreased.

The survey was conducted online, resulting in Christians who have little or no access to the internet, especially those living in rural areas, being unable to participate. According to Statistics South Africa (2013:51-52), there are more households in metropolitan areas that have internet access at home (16,4%), compared to families in rural areas (2%). In the SATS study, all nine of the provinces participated in the survey, but only two were statistically significant: Gauteng and Western Cape (Smith 2013:15). Although Mamelodi (a township in the Gauteng province) was not separately identifiable, Smith (2018: personal communication) has reason to believe that Mamelodi participated in the survey. Smith (2013:30) further concluded that even though 33% of people read less than a chapter a day, it was probably not enough to develop a healthy knowledge of the Bible. Nonetheless, this raises more questions about this research. Do emerging adults believe in the Bible's authority at all, and to what extent do they engage with it. If it is to a small degree, how can this be increased?

In the USA, a similar survey was conducted by *Pew Forum 28* (Pew Research Center 2010) concerning religious knowledge; the results show a lack of collective biblical knowledge and that Christians need to learn the foundational truths of their faith again. More and more people (Christians), according to the forum, do not regard Scriptures as the Word of God, which results in that they are not motivated or interested to read it. However, the *Barna Group* conducted a survey in 2018 to examine behaviours and beliefs about the Bible among U.S. adults. The results show that, despite shifting

cultural trends, Americans still read the Bible and it remains a powerful, transformative tool in their lives. According to *Pew Forum 28* (Pew Research Center 2010) the challenging news was that knowledge of “one’s religion” was very feeble. It seems, there is a sharp decline of Christianity as the dominant or prevailing worldview that it once was, and the author attributes it to the above indicators. Despite all of this, the *Barna Group* concluded in 2016 that Christians in the US still practice their faith in a variety of ways and there are more churched than unchurched Americans.

Cameron (1983:154-155) writes about the Bible’s authority, that it is the central message that runs through the Bible (although this perspective has been contested by some scholars, a conservative evangelical perspective presupposes this as foundational). He further explains that it is not only the authority of Holy Scripture that is at stake but also the authority of its divine author. Cameron (1983:154-155) emphasised that the “entire structure of Christian theology stands or falls by the authority of Scripture”. If people doubt the Scriptures’ authority, they will see no importance of why they should even read it. If Christians do not hold on to the inspiration or authority of the Word of God, what are they building their beliefs and theology upon?

If this is true about the centrality of Scriptures, believing that the Bible is God’s Word, that it is inspired, inerrant, and truthful, then what about the centrality of the message of the Bible, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the core of God’s message to humankind, and it must be central to the way we do theology (Smith 2013:13-14).

According to Matthew 4:4, Jesus said, “man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God”. Similar to our physical bodies requiring daily nourishment, our spiritual life should be maintained by the daily nourishment of the Word of God (Grudem 2020:118). This begs the question, how can emerging adults read and stay engaged with the Bible? What will it cost, or what efforts would it take to accomplish this? Maybe a fresh encounter with the Scriptures is needed; discovering its infallible truths, believing that it can transform people’s lives.

Donald & Harrington (2016:1-7) note that a church crisis is nothing new and one of the “most important spiritual resources in times of crisis in the church have been Scripture”. According to Asumang (2014:54-77):

it is the sacred responsibility of conservative Bible scholars to work as hard as possible to prevent the Bible from becoming irrelevant in the coming decades.

Asumang (2014:54-77) further states:

Maybe it’s time Christians; first and foremost, need to learn the foundational truths about their faith. Which includes a basic knowledge of the contents of the Bible and how the Bible’s teachings have been systematised into a framework of doctrine by various branches of the Christian faith over history.

Johnson (2015:54-76) states God gave Scripture to his people for many reasons, one being to promote spiritual growth, thus the necessity of reading the Bible. Perhaps Smith (2013:13-14) was correct in his findings that there is a need to change the way theology is conducted. Could it be that over time, the manner of “doing theology” was fragmented, even though teaching the distinctive doctrines of God, the Bible, and the trinity, but have emerging adults been shown or assisted in how to live and act in ways that glorify the Lord faithfully?

Authority and epistemology of emerging adults

The author investigated Christian African emerging adults’ epistemological understanding of the Bible with particular reference to contextual evangelism via semi-structured interviews. Based on these interviews, the findings show negligence in reading and understanding the Bible and applying biblical principles in their lives. Although they still believe that the Bible is trustworthy and authoritative, and very important to read, an epistemological understanding of it is lacking.

The study was conducted with 15 participants (8 males and 7 females) from 3 different denominations (Catholic, Charismatic and Lutheran). The required criteria included the following:

(1) young men and women between the age of 18-25 years and

(2) emerging adults who are Christian believers and attend their churches regularly.

Background

The research concept was triggered by a survey conducted by Dr Kevin Smith of the South African Theology Seminar (2013) concerning *Bible reading habits in South Africa*. Much of this study's findings corroborate the findings of that survey. The research objective was to gain insight into emerging adult's Bible reading practices, specifically in the township of Mamelodi, Gauteng, South Africa.

Overall, this study's participants showed a low percentage of commitment to reading the Bible daily for themselves and accepting the authority of the Word of God. However, they apply the teachings, which they predominantly heard via the preaching of the Bible in their churches. Many of them do not read the Bible daily. However, there is a high level of belief in the importance of reading the Bible. Traditional beliefs and morality also have a high level of consensus and their commitment to seeking to apply biblical values to their daily lives. For example:

- 96% believe in the importance of reading the Bible, however only 29% read their Bibles daily.
- 49% have read the Old Testament, and 51% have read the New Testament.
- 89% believe in the authority of the Bible, 95% believe that Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins, however only 58% believe that human beings are sinful and need a saviour.
- 80% believe that the Bible is relevant for today and addresses the problems emerging adults face.

There are also some tendencies in the information that should concern and motivate church leaders to do something about it. These include the following:

- 29% of the participants read their Bibles daily.
- 14% of the participants indicated that they have never read their Bibles.
- 63% believe that Christians go to heaven and 17% strongly disagree that unbelievers go to hell.
- 67% (agree/believe) that one may not consult a medium or traditional healer known as a Sangoma.
- 66% believe that one may not venerate the ancestors.

There remains a need for the church in South Africa to understand the extent to which the emerging adults read, know, and believe the Bible.

Methodology of the study

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in appropriate venues that facilitated dialogue after obtaining informed consent from the participants. The interviews ranged between 40-60 minutes each. At the start of each interview, participants were reminded of the purpose of the study, the procedure of the interview (including note-taking and digital recording), the risks involved (none known), the benefits involved (a contribution to the research), and the assurance of confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews using ten open-ended questions were conducted. Recorded interviews were transcribed and, after that, coded by hand as well as using Microsoft Excel.

Interpretation of the data

The author encountered several challenges while interpreting the data, which will be explained. The author is representing qualitative data on a quantitative scale. Participants were asked to give their opinions on a series of percentage scales. In each case, the response judged to reflect the most positive engagement with Scripture was assigned the value '100%', and the minor positive response the value '25%'.

For example, on the statement, ‘Believe in the authority of the Bible’, the following numerical values are assigned to responses:

Strongly Agree	100%
Agree	75%
Disagree	50%
Strongly Disagree	25%

On an average 25%–100% scale, 60% would be an average score, and 80% would be a high agreement level. However, if one uses a 25%-100% scale to ask confessed Christians whether they believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and the average comes in at 60%, one should undoubtedly be dissatisfied. The author hypothesises that all believing emerging adults would strongly agree with that statement, hoping for an average of 100%. If one were to ask 100 believing emerging adults whether they agree that human beings are sinful and the participants were to return the following responses, would one consider it good or bad?

As an example, here is the statement, human beings are sinful and need a Saviour:

Strongly Agree	58%
Agree	16%
Disagree	19%
Strongly Disagree	7%

Using the formula previously described, these participants would return an average score of 58% on a 100% scale. This would be both encouraging and discouraging. On the one hand, it would be encouraging that 58% of the participants firmly believe the statement. On the other hand, one would be disappointed that 7% do not agree at all.

In comparison with the survey conducted by the South African Theology Seminary, the author faced similar challenges. Throughout the interviews, the average scores ranged between 50% and 75%. In other words, they are all in the region that would be considered strong agreement on a standard survey. However, given the nature of the questions and the participants’ composition,

the author asked emerging adults who do attend church services and are involved in their church activities about their level of agreement concerning Christian beliefs.

Summary of the overall findings

The objective of this research was to gain insight into whether emerging adults still read their Bible, how often, and their epistemological understanding of the Bible. 80% of the emerging adults indicated that they are committed to applying the Bible's truths in their lives; however, 22% indicated that they seldom read the Bible, and 14% never read their Bible. These percentages lead to many questions: How can emerging adults apply the Bible's truths to their lives if they do not read it, or as some suggested, they do not understand the Bible. The author hopes that this study will inspire more research and reflection to find solutions to assist emerging adults in changing their Bible reading habits.

Emerging adults

This article articulates foundational questions of the research: Who are emerging adults and what are the challenges and changes that they face? There is no consensus concerning the age of emerging adults, with existing literature suggesting the period between 18 and 25 years of age (Arnett 2000:469-480, Bonnie and Stroud 2015:1-5). More recently, Arnett (2014:569-576) considered the age range of 18-29, now known as emerging adulthood in developmental psychology. The United Nations General Assembly (2005:23) twentieth-year review describes youth as persons between 15 and 24. However, in South Africa, emerging adults are persons between 15 and 35 years of age, with the reason given for this extended age being unfavourable circumstances that crippled many of these older youth during their role in the struggle against apartheid (Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation n.d.:2-3).

Emerging adulthood, as defined by Arnett (2015:473), is the period that's neither adolescence (age 12-18 years) nor young adulthood (age 18-35), also described as the in-between age. These young people have left the dependency of childhood and adolescence and have not yet accepted the

normative responsibilities in adulthood (Arnett 2015:469). The National Youth Policy (2014:1-36) explains that emerging adults do not see themselves as adolescents, yet they also do not see themselves entirely as adults. Mkandawire and Soludo (1998:3-4) concurs and further explains that generally, emerging adults indicates an interface between childhood and adulthood. He also states that no serious attempt has been made to formulate the age of emerging adults entirely is within South African youth structures.

Côté (2014:1-25) challenges Arnett's (2004:9-18) findings regarding identity exploration, overwhelming choices, self-centeredness and instability, which apply to all social classes. He also argues that this emerging adulthood theory fused the transition to adulthood rather than recognising the diverse ways in which young people come of age. He offers more convincing variations such as socio-economic factors. Other scholars (Schwartz, Tanner and Syed 2015:3) have argued that the emerging adulthood features reflect Western values, such as being self-focused and independent in sharp contrast to other cultures like Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Côté (2014:1-25) also illustrates that Arnett's findings are universal and that some emerging adults are well prepared and equipped to find their way into adulthood, whereas others struggle.

Other factors such as cultural and philosophical trends and institutional and internal dynamics in emerging adults' lives might better understand the emerging adults. However, the author's subjects provided greater insight into a topic that needs further research, especially in the South African context. Setran and Kiesling (2013:1-2) suggest that even though this is such a critical stage in emerging adults' lives, their spiritual formation has hardly been a topic of inquiry in Christian education literature. More scholarly research is needed in this field.

The APA Dictionary of Psychology (2015) describes emerging adults as follows:

... a developmental stage that is neither adolescence nor young adulthood but is theoretically and empirically distinct from them both, spanning the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18 to 25. Emerging adulthood is distinguished by

relative independence from social roles and from normative expectations.

The age range of 18-25 years has been selected for this study because of research conducted by Arnett (2000:478-479) and Bonnie and Stroud (2015:4-5). According to Arnett (2000:469-470) and Bonnie and Stroud (2015:1-2), there is no definitive agreement concerning the age of emerging adults with existing literature suggesting the period between 18 and 25 years of age. Although emerging adulthood is virtually non-universal, Arnett (2000:479-480) suggests that emerging adulthood would most likely be found in highly industrialised countries. Thus, indicating that occasionally in traditional non-western cultures, emerging adults were purported by entry into marriage. However, this assumption has changed. Emerging adults are extending their higher education, enhancing their career opportunities, which results in other responsibilities being put on hold like, marriages and parenting.

It is essential to highlight that not all scholars agree that emerging adulthood is a new stage of human development. Others contend that it is a highly fluctuating process that resists stage-like characteristics. Côté (2014:184-185) challenges Arnett's (2004:373-374) findings regarding identity exploration, overwhelming choices, self-centeredness and instability, which apply to all social classes. He offers more convincing variations such as socio-economic factors. Other scholars (Schwartz, Tanner and Syed 2015:3) have argued that emerging adulthood features reflect Western values, such as being self-focused and independent in sharp contrast to other cultures like Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation (n.d.:36-37) states that unfavourable circumstances caused intellectual and developmental challenges amongst the emerging adults, which is evident in the so-called "youth" within the township of Mamelodi. Socio-economic data clearly show that the most of township residents are inadequate and that the unemployment rate is very high. However, with increasing globalisation, the critical factors of the economy (which sometimes aid to emerging adults changing jobs frequently) and emerging adults seeking higher education, it is purported that in the 21st century, emerging adults will become normative worldwide. Nevertheless, the length and content (critical factors of the economy) may still differ between countries.

Examining the challenges

Emerging adulthood has received the least attention in Christian education literature and constitutes the most far-reaching challenges to church and theology (Setran and Kiesling (2013:1-2). How can the church assist emerging adults during this transition period in their lives? Young people are leaving church at high rates in America and Europe (McDowell and Wallace 2019:27). Christian leaders and academics have spoken a great deal about the disengagement of emerging adults from faith communities (Setran and Kiesling 2013:7-8) while the spiritual narrative of emerging adults' culture has shifted — toward secularism and away from the Bible and Christianity (Kinnaman & Hawkins 2011:49-50) Emerging adults and the church are living in the tension of profound cultural change.

McDowell and Wallace (2019:32) argue that young people are far more articulate and well researched because the internet is accessed easily, resulting in scepticism. Kinnaman & Hawkins (2011:49-50) added that few would debate that humans live in a knowledge economy and a creative age. In their studies, the Barna Group (2018:15-16) found that one of the influences on emerging adults is that they find themselves in a world saturated by digital technology. They further attest that the ever-present digital technology has a far more significant impact on emerging adults; it changes the way emerging adults process and interact with information. Not only this but the Barna Group (2018:17-18) strongly advised that there are neurological implications such as “memory problem-solving, concentration, addiction and risk-taking behaviours”. Another factor that the author, from personal observation, wants to add to the list is the lack of entrepreneurial skills evident in emerging adults as they do not have to find solutions by themselves. Instead, they visit different search engines such as ‘Google’, which seems to hamper their creativity. Sefl and Rhom (2017:1-2), quoting Michael Harris, concurs and adds:

The Googleization of knowledge - that ultimate searchability - creates a great bounty of potential avenues for research. It cannot, however, become a substitute for the strange vagaries of human intuition and creative leaps. We need to insist on

absolute randomness, and a significant degree of pure, haphazard discovery, in the tools we use to explore our world.

Stefl and Rohm (2017:1-2) propose asking:

Have I paused to exercise my brain and wrestle with (even if for just one minute) possible solutions before looking to the wisdom of the Internet?

They further add, though it is tempting to do so, depending too heavily on what others have achieved in the past can draw one into the traps of tradition and an accumulative, rather than revolutionary and disruptive, innovation.

Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011:48-49) further suggest that emerging adults face other unique challenges, such as relativism - "what is true for me may not be true for you", believing that right and wrong are subjective. They also face cultural factors (alienation and scepticism of authority figures). Setran and Kiesling (2013:9-10) add that it can be a very arduous and lonely journey, accompanied by depression and anxiety, for most emerging adults. Kinnaman and Hawkins (2011:194-195) further claim that emerging adults deal with profound technological, spiritual and social changes that characterise our time. The changing nature of access, new questions about authority, and increasing relational and institutional alienation. The disconnection between the generations and the immense gap between the two worlds also contribute to emerging adults' loneliness. Sefl and Rhom (2017:1-2) conclude with a quote from Nicholas Carr:

What the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a geyser on a Jet Ski.

Epistemology and ontology

Epistemology

This article explores the nature of epistemology, focussing on emerging adults' understanding of the Bible's authority. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and origin of knowledge (Collins English Dictionary 2018) and asks the question, "How do we know what we know?" Keener (2016:155-172) advocates embracing an epistemological revelation when it comes to the Bible, stating that Christ must ultimately be Lord of one's epistemology as well as everything else. He indicates that a more in-depth knowledge of the Bible is required to know who God is and further asks: what would an epistemology look like with God's biblical revelation of God as its starting point? He posits that one might speak of Christian epistemology as epistemological preaching, founded on historical evidence and confirmed by God's own Spirit. Johnson (2013:15), on the other hand, believes that the Christian's scriptures could be theologically described as the beginning and ending with an epistemological outlook.

Udefi (2014:108) writes that an

African epistemology is understood by those who propose it. Thus, the African conceptualises interprets, and apprehends reality within the context of African cultural or collective experience.

He further states that African epistemology is based on their acceptance that such concepts of knowledge, truth and rationality can only be interpreted using African concepts. An African cultural experience contrasts starkly against that of a Western or non-African conceptual framework as these are of extreme polarised opposite thoughts regarding epistemology. However, Reagan (2004:1-6) proposed that it is not unrealistic to contemplate how we can learn from Western and indigenous educational traditions. Airoboman and Asekhanu (2012:13) raised whether Africans have a peculiar way of knowing different from non-Africans. Moreover, is universal epistemology not applicable for Africans? They conclude that African epistemology must not be peculiar, but it must be available and meaningful to non-Africans because epistemology has to do with the nature of knowing.

Jimoh and Thomas (2015:55-56) suggest that there could be different approaches and perspectives as to how we understand the world around us; nonetheless, we cannot continue to allow a discourse within geographical boundaries, such as when we say African epistemology or Western epistemology. Epistemology, or any form of discipline at all, can be supposed to be the same all over. Kaphagawani and Malherbe (1998:206), too, advocate that wherever epistemology is practised, it is the same. There is no such thing as an explicitly African epistemology. Udefi (2014:116) further states that the people fighting for a specific unique African epistemology do this out of a need to redeem Africa, seemingly devastated during colonialism.

In summation, the author posits that both Western and African thought processes ultimately lead to the realisation that we are dependent on a transcendent being for our reasoning and epistemology methods. This is the universal element of philosophy that we have a common denominator in the transcendent God of creation. This discussion also leads into another branch of philosophy, namely 'ontology', which deals with existence.

Ontology

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that deals with being (Collins English Dictionary 2018) and asks questions such as, "What things exist? What categories do they belong to; is there such a thing as objective reality?" Freeman (2016:1-4) suggests that the language of being is employed to speak about the nature and character of salvation, the same terms and imagery being used to talk about the Trinity and Christ's two natures. Geisler (2000:110-112) supports this and states that theology's ontological ground can be better perceived when theologians speak about God's nature and act—for instance, when they explain divine eternity. Why are Christians or humans so hesitant to build their ontological convictions from Scripture and per with its guidelines as Canale (2008:16) raises the question? They are probably conditioned by the inertia of a tradition established on the assumption that objective or ultimate reality is timeless.

Canale (2005:5-8) also believes that philosophy, particularly ontology, plays a grounding role in evangelicals' theological beliefs, but by and large, they have little interest in it. He further states that most evangelicals think their thought and teachings have no relation to or contact with philosophy. Nevertheless,

theology and ontology are valid and complimentary, and on this hermeneutical and methodological basis, Christian theology was born and constructed. While Scripture does not address ontology in the technical style of academic circles, it certainly has a lot to say about issues such as God, human beings, the world, and knowledge. The evangelical way is to build theology on biblical thinking. Wiles (2008:1-12) believes that one important feature is that the Bible's authority is foundational to the traditional Christian theologian, to the Church and above all, to Christ himself.

To conclude, emerging adults will benefit if they fully grasp the ontology of the nature and character of the church, having a complete understanding of the relation of grace and salvation, which is foundational to the truth of the message of the Bible, naturally leads into the priority of the contextual proclamation of the gospel.

Contextual proclamation of the gospel

Kiesling and Setran (2013:6-7) raised two fundamental questions while researching emerging adults' spiritual formation.

First, what does the gospel have to offer emerging adults during their formation through the adult transition? Second, what do emerging adults, shaped by the gospel, have to offer to the church and the world?

Therefore, this section will explore the contextual proclamation of the gospel based on the above questions.

The Lausanne Covenant (2009:39) defines evangelism as:

Spread[ing] the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures, and that, as the reigning Lord, he now offers the forgiveness of sins and the liberating gifts of the Spirit to all who repent and believe. But evangelism itself is the proclamation of the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord, intending to persuade people to come to him personally and so be reconciled to God. The

results of evangelism include obedience to Christ, incorporation into his Church and responsible service in the world.

The Third Lausanne Congress hosted in Cape Town in 2010 proclaimed that African brothers and sisters could rejoice in the extraordinary growth of the Church in Africa. While Africans were cognizant of their suffering under apartheid in the past, there was a sense of gratitude for spreading the gospel and the sovereign work of God in recent history. At the congress, challenges were raised: How does the Good News relate to Africa's situation, where the struggle against poverty, disease and ignorance continues (Editors IBMR 2011:60).

If the gospel is to have a profound impact on African people, it needs to be culturally contextualised. Kato (1975:39) points out the relevance of Christianity to Africans today. His work's goal was to advance the ambition expressed in his famed rallying cry, "Let African Christians be Christian Africans!" This is a continuing challenge regarding the African church today. Wiryadinata (2015:1-15) argues that the gospel, according to African people, cannot be sufficient unless and until it is formulated to function in a concrete or specific situation while remaining biblically accurate. For some Africans, the Bible seems to reflect their cultural life because the culture is the message's vehicle. However, there is a tendency, according to Stott (1986:74-75),

to absolutise culture and minimise the cultural changes which conversion ought to imply and that people who accept the gospel ought to retain their traditional culture.

Newbigin (2014:11) asserts that even though God accepts human culture, God judges human culture and that "the gospel, therefore, is to be addressed to the whole human community, since the real human of its people is bound up inextricably with the language and culture of the whole".

The author wants to point out that the three denominations studied proclaim the gospel in their unique context. The Lutheran church believes that conduct and belief should go hand-in-hand. Others should observe one's lifestyle, and that is why they do believe in the preaching of sound doctrine. The Catholic church will put up a tent and launch a crusade, preaching the gospel. The Charismatic church believes in going out on outreach, sometimes locally,

proclaiming the gospel in malls, on the streets to the homeless and in hospitals. However, the church also takes teams to neighbouring countries, preaching the gospel. In this manner, Africans (emerging adults) who hear the good news from within their cultural context and express the gospel in their thought forms and philosophy will address contextual issues such as polygamy, family structure and the spirit world. This emphasises the need to authenticate Christianity's teaching on the authority of the Bible to emerging adults.

There will never be another gospel; Christians should realise that they hold in their possession the only message of salvation the world will ever hear. Whether, friends, family, and co-workers are ever to be set free from their sins, it will be because someone proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ to them. That is why Jesus commissions to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that Jesus commanded them" (Mt 28:19-20). Packer (2013:44-45) says that evangelicals were unable to pass on to emerging adults an orthodox model of faith that could take root and withstand the secular onslaught. Ironically, the billions of dollars the church spent on youth pastors, Christian music, advertising, and media have created a culture of young Christians who know little about their faith except how they should feel about it. Emerging adults have strong convictions about the culture war, but do not know why they should obey the Bible, the fundamentals of doctrine, or the experience of moral disciplines. This will lead to future generations of Christians who are going to be ignorant and unprepared for culture-wide pressures. As the culture and the worldview shift, the church too must continue to research the concerns of emerging adults so that she can be prepared to resolve and strategise effectively in reaching emerging adults for the kingdom of God.

Christianity's teaching on the authority of the Bible

The author focuses predominantly on the authority of the Bible. Four arguments will validate Christianity's teaching concerning the authority of the Bible. The first argument is the Bible's inspiration. Biblical writers believed they received supernatural divine influence to write the Holy Scriptures. Erickson (2013:225) defines the inspiration of Scriptures as the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit on the Scripture writers which rendered their writings an accurate record of the revelation which resulted in what they wrote being the

Word of God. It is also defined as: “that extraordinary or supernatural divine influence vouchsafed to those who wrote the Holy Scriptures, rendering their writings infallible” (New Bible Dictionary online:2019). Therefore, the divine inspiration of the Bible originated from God, who sovereignly influenced the writers of the Bible by the Holy Spirit, resulting in the Bible being the very Word of God.

The second is the divine authority of the Bible. The authority of Scripture implies that all the words in the Bible are God’s words in such a way that to distrust or defy any word of the Bible is to disobey God (Grudem 2020:73). Therefore, the Bible asserts itself to be the spoken word of God – both the Old and New Testaments. Erickson (2013:240) asserts that one finds oneself in a world with many distorted ideas and incorrect opinions and the Bible is indeed a source of guidance. When one interpretes it correctly, one can entirely rely upon it in all that it teaches. “It is a sure, dependable, and trustworthy authority” (Erickson 2013:240). Geisler (2011:182) emphatically declares that the authority of the word of God never changes nor will never pass away. This statement underlines the Bible’s promise: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Mt.24:35; Is.40:8).

The third argument states that the Bible cannot teach error and that the Bible is without error; that the Bible is entirely truthful in all of its teachings is the doctrine of inerrancy (Erickson 2013:246). The Chicago statement (Themelios n.d.) affirms inerrancy as follows: “Scripture in its entirety is inerrant, being free from all falsehood, fraud or deceit”. Erickson (2013:259) explains that

the Bible when correctly interpreted in light of the level to which culture and the means of communication had developed at the time it was written,

and because of the purposes for which it was given, is entirely truthful in all that it affirms. There is a clear and emphatic affirmation that the Bible is trustworthy, reliable and without error. This fact reflects on the character of God and is foundational to our understanding of everything the Bible teaches. Thus, the Bible is the churches’ only rule for faith and conduct.

The fourth argument is the Bible and inculturation that indicates the “presentation and re-expression of the Gospel” in forms and terms proper to the culture (New Catholica Encyclopaedia 2010). This indicates the continued dialogue between the Word of God and a particular culture and the

eventual infusion of the Gospel values in the culture in such a way that their values become inalienable part of the culture (Ukpong 2015:33-34).

Katola (2014:283) considers inculturation, as a process that presents the gospel message in such a manner that the word of God becomes “sympathetic and compliant with human ecological realities of the people”. Thus, the gospel then should be presented in such a way that it can be applied to all people so that humanity will be conformed more and more to the image of Christ. A challenge for the church is to present the biblical Jesus to emerging adults within a postmodern world that is changing so that they can transform and educate their culture. When the Christ message and local culture interact, its presentation and lived experience change. Malphurs (2007:33) states that the cry of the hearts of this generation is their desire to experience God and his presence. Rather than attend church, they want to be the church, part of the family of God. Kanu (2012:242-243) adds that many Christian communities in Africa need to be organised along the lines of the idea of the church as the family of God. Smith (2006:283-284) states that

African theology is rapidly becoming central to mainstream Christianity in Africa and among the thousands of African Christian diasporic communities and a force to be reckoned with.

There are more arguments such as the necessity of Scriptures, but the author has discovered that these four arguments will serve as themes and will form the basis for validating the Biblical teachings authority, due to the inadequacy shown in semi-constructed interviews the researcher had conducted with participants. This debate contributes into the development of a specific theology relating to the Bible’s authority in the context of emerging adults.

Developing a contextual theology, based on the authority of the Bible, for African emerging adults between the ages of 18 and 25 residing in Mamelodi

Upon analysing the data gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted with emerging adults, the researcher discovered that emerging adults struggled with a general identity crisis, namely, their distorted worldview, culture and sexuality is a result of relativising truth. Stonestreet and Kunkle (2017:3-4) quoting Samuel Rodriguez raise the following questions:

Will the next generation (emerging adults) be defined by the radical cultural shifts taking place, or will the culture be defined by a generation committed by the radical love, redemptive truth, and restorative grace of Jesus?

Is there a biblically focused roadmap that can guide emerging adults in navigating the difficult challenges of worldview, sexuality, and sexual orientation? In other words, can one equip emerging adults with a biblical worldview, by having God's design for males and females and truth that is knowable and corresponds to reality? The author suggests that the development of a contextual theology will assist emerging adults in finding their way amid the multiple challenges that they are facing.

Magezi and Igba (2017:1-2) write that there is an ongoing difficulty in defining African theology for two crucial reasons: (1) the quest for a definitive African theology is a relatively recent endeavour and (2) the vastness and complexity of the African continent. They further suggest that African theology should also seek to develop contextual African theologies with global relevancy, but it should be derived from Scriptures and Christian tradition. Mbiti (1976:164) describes African theology as the theological reflection by African Christians. Suppose theology is generally understood as reflection and discourse about God, African theology then is that theological effort that is embarked mainly by Africans and non-Africans familiar with the African environment, and who seek to respond theologically to these issues. Theology derived from the interplay of Christian tradition, or any aspect of it, on the one hand, and African cosmology or any aspect of it on the other. In addition, Nyende (2007:3-4)

contends that the Bible is fundamental to a theology that claims to be Christian and it is

incumbent on those who wish to articulate an African theology to use the Bible in dialogue with African cosmologies and culture for it to be a Christian theology.

Nyende (2007:3-4) further indicates that the goal and intent of Christian theology can be summed up as the “building and sustenance of Christian communities in faith, ethos and cultus”, adding to the need of contextualisation of theology.

In essence, contextualisation is a way of connecting the never-changing Word of God in the ever-changing world and its all-purpose contexts. Johnson (2011:62) suggests that the content of Christianity does not need to be changed to fit into the culture. Instead, culture is transformed by Christianity as Christianity uses cultural language as well as symbols in its communication of the unchanging gospel.

This concept opens the possibility of approaching the Bible and reflecting upon the Christian faith in new ways in the light of needs and priorities peculiar to emerging adults. Besides, Bevans & Tahaafe-Williams (2011:9-10) write that churches should consider how emerging adults can engage in theology, as well as how young people need to be trained and cultivated as theologians. Theology is the birth right of the entire church, and this includes the world’s emerging adults. Bergmann (2017:2-3) concurs and adds:

Far too little attention has been paid to the fact that the dominant context for theology has been Eurocentric, male and rational, according to the Enlightenment paradigm. Even when the voices of the “marginalised” are occasionally admitted to the discussion, seldom are they given full status; on the contrary, they are frequently relegated- yes, to the margins- on the grounds that “praxis” somehow does not merit recognition as “real theology”.

However, Matheny (2012:14-15), in quoting Kofi Appiah-Kubi speaking at the Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians held in Ghana in December

1977, summarised the upshot of these new developments for theologians. He declared, “African theologians” are trying to

find a theology that speaks to our people where we are, to enable us to answer the critical question of our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 16:15, ‘Whom do you (African Christians) say that I am?’

This question, according to Bevans (2002:97), the contextualisation of theology, the effort to explain Christian faith in terms of a particular context (African Christians) is indeed a theological imperative. For Bevans (2002:97) doing theology in context is not something optional, it is a mandate. De Vries (2016:6-7) adds that the contextualisation of theology “is both an objective and a subjective, both a corporate and an individual exercise”, a continuous process in which Christians in any cultural settings formulate and apply God’s word. The strength of contextual theology is that it stresses that the gospel is relevant to every culture precisely because it transcends every culture. To conclude, Clark (2012:15-16) writes that contextual theology will deepen the church’s appreciation for God’s gift of diversity, gender, cultures, gifts and circumstances. For Clark (2012:15-16), it offers the church a multi-splendored identity, a new appreciation for its unity, catholicity, basically a new model for doing contextual theology rooted in Christ Jesus, the capstone and head of his church.

Conclusions and recommendations

The author sought to identify strategies that employ an epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible with reference to contextual evangelism of Christian African emerging adults within a Lutheran, Catholic, and Charismatic church in Mamelodi, Tshwane, Gauteng. It was conducted to contribute to an accurate contextual proclamation of the Bible. The goal was to develop practical strategies arising from the findings to help the broader Church address one of the challenges facing emerging adults, namely, a comprehensive epistemological understanding of the Bible is lacking. Further research and recommendations will assist the church’s influence concerning emerging adults reading and studying the Bible.

Rosen (2000:15-16), surmises that it is suitable for human beings to know, rather than be ignorant, thus providing the foundation that it is suitable for emerging adults to have an epistemological understanding of the authority of the word of God. That human beings are reliant on a transcendent being for their methods of reasoning and epistemology, was the one of the findings of this study; emerging adults would benefit if they truly comprehended the ontology of the nature and character of the church, having an understanding of the relation of grace and salvation which is a foundational truth of the Bible. The Bible in its simplicity and paradox, leads humankind to God and his plan to redeem a fallen world. The proclamation of the true gospel relies on Biblical truth and the understanding of the existence of the Godhead and his redemptive plan. The concept of the contextual proclamation authority of the Bible to emerging adults was explored, with the finding that as the culture and the worldview around one changes, the church too must continue to research the concerns of emerging adults so that it can be prepared to strategise effectively in reaching emerging adults with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Additionally, Jesus Christ of Nazareth is not only the primary proclaimer of the good news, Jesus Christ, is undeniably the *Good News* (MacArthur 2017:101-102). Objectively all preachers and teachers should proclaim Christ's gospel that effectively transforms the lives of emerging adults during different eras and in different places.

In this final section, the researcher summarised the process and findings of the research study that aimed to equip emerging adults with an epistemological understanding of the authority of the Bible. No matter how complex or complicated the issues, we need to address them wholeheartedly and as a matter of urgency.¹ Corinthians 15.58 (NIV) highlights this,

Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.

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