

Christian Missions and the Challenge of Cultural Diversity in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the dynamic relationship between Christian missions and cultural diversity in contemporary contexts. The paper delves into the foundational concept of Christian missions, highlighting its purpose and relevance amidst diverse cultural landscapes. It offers an overview of cultural diversity, emphasizing its complexities and implications for cross-cultural engagement. The paper draws from a biblical perspective to underscore the imperative of cross-cultural missions, reflecting on passages that advocate for global evangelism and cultural understanding. Challenges inherent in cultural diversity, such as communication barriers, issues of identity, and the struggle with contextualized meanings, are examined. Key recommendations include prioritizing cultural and linguistic sensitivity in mission work, combating tribalism and factionalism within Christian communities, amplifying teachings on cross-cultural missions, and advocating for contextualized approaches to sharing the gospel. The paper underscores the necessity of adapting mission strategies to embrace cultural diversity effectively in the contemporary era.

INTRODUCTION

The reality of cultural diversity in the 21st century constitutes a significant challenge to Christian missions. The diversity of human culture has overwhelming implications for missions, especially in contemporary times. Some areas of concern include language factors, identity problems, cultural awareness, cultural diversity, and worldviews. For example, Nigeria, as an entity, is multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multi-lingual in structure and formation, which poses a challenge to missions. The concept of unity in diversity has given Christians the challenge and task of cross-cultural missions, a herculean task in every ramification. The Bible sees the human race as one, and therefore, cultural restrictions or barriers should not exist in the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church should imbibe the doctrine of inclusiveness by giving room for the gospel to be propagated to different people, but not without the consciousness of the reality of cultural diversity.

Given the study, this paper discusses the concept of Christian missions, and provides an overview of cultural diversity, and a biblical basis for cross-cultural missions. Furthermore, the challenge of

cultural diversity in Christian missions is discussed, and conclusions are drawn from the study.

CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Through Jesus Christ, God had placed on Christians the responsibility of continuing with His redemptive plan. The Church and other mission agencies owe it as a point of duty to join God in this redemptive work of restoring sinful humanity to God through her mission programmes. *Missio Dei*, the Latin rendition of the mission of God, describes the redemptive mission of God, which is the restoration and redemption of sinful humanity. On the other hand, *Missio ecclesia*, the Church's mission, is all the concerted efforts by the Christian church in furthering the redemptive plan of God.

In defining and explaining missions, John Mark Terry et al. view missions as the conscious effort on the part of the Church, in its cooperative capacity, or through voluntary agencies, to proclaim the gospel (with all these imply) among peoples and regions where it is still unknown or only inadequately known.¹ George W. Peters asserts that missions should not be seen as an imposition on the Church but rather as something that naturally occurs to her, much like grapes naturally occur to branches that remain in the vine.² He further states that missions flow from the Church's inner constitution, character, calling and design.³ *Missio Dei* has the central idea that God is the One who initiates and sustains mission.⁴

According to Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, mission is the God-given call to appreciate and share one's religious experience and insights, first within one's community and tradition and then with people and communities of other cultural, social, and religious traditions.⁵ Gabriel Oluwasegun opines that missions is any deliberate effort by a church or group of Christians to take the gospel of Jesus Christ across to a group of people who have never heard it.⁶ Benjamin Kwasi asserts that God's mission is much more expansive than

1. Terry, John Mark, et al. *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundation, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville Tennessee: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1998), 2.

2. Peters, George W. *A Biblical Theology of Missions*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 200.

3. Ibid.

4. Moreau, A. Scout, et. al.. *Introducing World Missions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic.2014), 18.

5. Senior, Donald, C.P and Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., *The Biblical Foundation for Missions*. (New York: Orbis Books, 1984), 3.

6. Gabriel, Oluwasegun. *A Handbook for Missionaries*. (Cambridge Heights: Covenant Promises Rescue Missions Network Int'l, 2018), 16.

simply planting new churches or gaining a few new members.⁷ Missions is man caught up in God's redemptive current.⁸ From the ongoing, the mission of God has been firmly established, and Christians are called to engage vigorously in this mission of God.

OVERVIEW OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural diversity is a reality in Christian missions. It is a major factor that must be taken seriously if any appreciable impact is to be made missiologically. Before carrying out an overview of cultural diversity, it will be expedient to discuss the subject of culture and language, which appear inseparable. It is a culture that gave birth to cultural diversity, which is about the different shades of culture, and culture could only be expressed using the vehicle of language. The culture of a people defines who they are and what they stand for. Different authors and writers have defined and explained culture from various perspectives. Eugene A. Nida defines culture as "all learnt behaviour which is socially acquired, that is, the material and non-material traits passed from one generation to another."⁹ Marvin Harris views culture as the learnt, socially acquired tradition and lifestyle of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting (behaving).¹⁰ Raymond Williams defines culture as the complex and broad set of relationships, values, attitudes, and behaviours that bind a specific community consciously or unconsciously.¹¹ Williams further notes that culture, like history, allows for change. In his exhaustive definition of culture, G. Hofstede states that culture is the collective body of information that a group of people have accumulated over generations through individual and collective effort. This includes knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, concepts of time, roles, spatial relations, the universe, and material goods and possessions. According to him, culture is dynamic, shaping and being shaped by those who occupy it.¹² In summary, he said that culture is the collective mental training that sets one group or category of people apart from another.¹³ Culture defines a people. This understanding should guide missionaries in their place of primary assignment. Failure to consider culture will apparently lead to culture shock.

Culture shock is one of the experiences missionaries

face in cross-cultural missions. The inability of some missionaries to handle this results in frustration, dissatisfaction, and even attrition. It will be proper to discuss culture shock in the context of this study. This phenomenon happens when a missionary leaves his/her culture to another without adequate information and preparation. Culture shock is a universal phenomenon. In his affirmation of culture shock, Louis Luzbetak writes:

*The missionary apostolate and cultural anthropology share an important common interest: culture change. They are both interested in knowing how the minds and ways of a people change, how such change might be predicted, how such change might be directed and best maintained, and how change might be introduced with as little disorganisation as possible.*¹⁴

Missionaries, as messengers of God to the people, come face to face with the people and their culture. They are called to bring light into the darkened minds of the people. To achieve this demands absolute carefulness without causing disaffection among the people to whom they have come to witness. In corroborating the missionaries as agents of change, Louis states:

*Whether missionaries are inclined to admit it or not, they are professional agents of culture change, for there is no other way of establishing, consolidating and perpetuating the Church in society than through its culture. Since missionaries are uncompromising agents of culture change by their very vocation, the study of missionary techniques cannot be divorced from the study of culture.*¹⁵

For missionaries to do well, they must consider the culture of the people they are called to serve. Culture is a crucial issue in cross-cultural missions. Missions is global and, therefore, cuts across various cultural divides.

Language and culture go hand in hand. It is very much impossible to separate the people from their language. Every missionary activity must be conveyed through the vehicle of language. Culture, language and the people are interwoven. Understanding the language of the people is key to accessing the people socially, culturally and otherwise. Social, religious, economic and cultural interactions are done through the instrumentality of language. Again, language is the symbol that individuals use to identify themselves as participants in their culture and as members of social organisations, which are written or signed.¹⁶ It also means human speech, written or spoken by one nation, tribe, or similar group.¹⁷ According to Charles Kraft, language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols that people use in a society for a range of interpersonal

7. Kwasi, Benjamin A., *Evangelism and Missions. Biblical and Strategic Insights for the Church Today*. (Bukuru: Acts Christian Textbooks, 2018), 8.

8. John et al.

9. Nida, Eugene A., *Customs and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 28.

10. Harris, Marvin. *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1983), 5.

11. Williams, Raymond. *Definition of Culture by different authors*. 1995.

12. Hofstede, G. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the mind*. (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), np.

13. Ibid.

14. Kane, J Herbert. *Understanding Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Book House, 1987), 345.

15. Luzbetak, Louis J. *The Church and Cultures* (Techny IL. Divine Word Publications, 1970), 14

16. Encyclopedia Britannica S.V language

17. Thorndike, EL. Ed. *Foreman's Advanced Dictionary* (Illinois: Scott Foreman and company, 1979), 576.

and intergroup functions, including idea formulation and communication, motivating others, evoking sympathy, evoking fear, and self-expression, such as venting steam or flaunting oneself.¹⁸ Communication, identity expression, play, creative expression, and emotional release are a few language purposes.¹⁹

In their observation of the experience of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra, Scott Moreau et al. state that "On Paul's first missionary journey, himself and Barnabas encountered the reality of communication across cultural boundaries"²⁰(Acts 14:8-10). They further revealed that Luke's account vividly captures the peril of intercultural communication. The reality is that misunderstandings in communication due to culture are a regular part of the life of a missionary.²¹ In his discussion on the qualifications of a missionary, Harol R. Cook notes that as part of the physical qualification, the missionary needs to learn well the language of the people to whom he/she goes, adopt him/herself physically and mentally to a new culture and new living conditions.²² One of the reasons Harol put forward the need for language is that the missionary does his/her work in a language other than his/her own. He/she has to learn that language, not superficially to bargain in the market or to give orders to a construction gang, but thoroughly.²³

BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS

From its very beginning, the Christian religion had had an identity as one of the challenges facing it. The original custodians of the faith were of Jewish extraction, moulded and grounded in the Jewish tradition and philosophy. Consequent to the inclusiveness Jesus laid as the foundation and the coming of the Gentiles to Christianity, cultural diversity became unavoidable. According to Dean Flemming, the book of Acts narrates the story of a church whose basic identity consists of sharing the good news about Jesus with various audiences and among previously unreached people.²⁴ He further states that Acts is a cultural product that participates in the particular first-century cultural and literary world that Luke shares with his readers.²⁵

Luke acknowledges the reality of cultural diversity in Christian missions as expressed in Acts of the Apostles. Flemming opines that the focus in Acts

is on witnessing God's salvation in Jesus, among Aramaic and Greek-speaking Jews, Samaritans, God-fearing Gentiles and finally pagans. As a result, as the word of God crosses linguistic, cultural, and religious barriers, new translations of the gospel are produced under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Despite Jesus' promise of a universal witness by his followers in Acts 1:8, Chapters 1-5 describe a Christian movement that operates within the ethnic and religious borders of the Jewish people.²⁶ The original articulation of God's new revelation in Christ was tailored for the Jews based on their history, scripture, culture and religious experience. The gospel cannot exist apart from a concrete historical and cultural home. Further, according to Flemming, Jesus was the Jewish Messiah who would bring back Israel's kingdom (Acts 1:6; 5:31). Although the early church was woven around the Jews, this was not a mistake as God's eternal plan of salvation was not restricted to the Jews, but to as many as will believe in Jesus Christ irrespective of tribe, colour, language or tongue (Jn.1:12, Gal. 3:28).

The gospel responded positively in overcoming the obstacles in the early stage of close identification with the Jewish culture through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The miracle of languages made it possible for all people to hear the gospel in their native language, as recorded in Acts 2:1-4. Had the Holy Spirit not enabled those in attendance to hear the gospel in their native languages, many could have missed the opportunity to understand the message and carry it home. This and other experiences gave birth to a multicultural church. Everything worked for God's perfect plan and timing because of the nature of the world in which Jesus came, and the disciples were called to witness. Howard Marshall observes that Jesus was born in the fullness of time into a world that a vast cultural revolution has shaped.²⁷

The revolution began under Alexander the Great, whose policy was to spread the Greek way of life throughout his domain, from Adriatic in the West to India in the East, from Macedonia in the North to Egypt in the South.²⁸ As noted by Marshall, this Hellenistic way of life was characterised by the use of the Greek language as a universal means of communication, the spread of trade, the setting up of a Greek kind of political system, and the spread of Greek thinking, literature and art.²⁹ Marshall concludes that the New Testament has a world in which different cultures or ways of life were in contact, leading to assimilation and sharp collisions between them.³⁰

18. Kraft, Charles H.. *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1996), 247.

19. Encyclopedia Britannica, language.

20. Moreau, A Scott, et. all. *Introducing World Missions: A Biblical, Historical, and Practical Survey* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 251.

21. Moreau, 251.

22. Harold R. Cooke. *An Introduction to Christian Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1954), 110.

23. Cooke, 115.

24. Flemming, Dean. *Contextualization in the New Testament: Pattern for Theology and Mission.* (England: Inter-varsity Press, 2005), 25.

25. Ibid, 26.

26. Flemming, 30-31.

27. Stott, John R.W., and Robert Coote ed. *Down to Earth Studies in Christianity and Culture.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B Publishing Company, 1980), 17.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Stott and Robert, 20.

CHALLENGES OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

Cultural diversity, no doubt, poses some challenges to Christian missions. There are several instances, scripturally and from practical experience, of missionaries in the reality of challenges due to cultural differences. Paul's affirmation of the Corinthian Church confirms that Christian missions in multicultural situations face diverse cultural challenges that must be approached holistically for maximum impact. The Apostle Paul wrote, "To the Jews, I became a Jew...to those under the law, I became as one under the law, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor.9:20-22). Paul, a Jew, was born in Tarsus but brought up in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel.³¹ Against this background, it is appropriate to highlight some challenges of cultural diversity in Christian missions.

Communication across Cultures: First, Christian missions faces the challenge of communication across cultures. The gospel is meant to be communicated through the vehicle of language. Taking the gospel to people of diverse cultures entails learning and understanding the target group's language. As noted before, the Pentecost experience solved the problem of language, which could have denied many attendees the privilege of hearing the gospel in their native language.

Issue of Identity: Another challenge of Christian missions in the 21st century is the issue of identity. As the early Christian church started experiencing growth, the problem of identity and sectionalism became evident. Luke captured this scenario when he noted that "in those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food" (Acts 6:1, NIV). There was disparity and a case of marginalisation within the congregation. Identity and sectionalism became inevitable. The proactive approach of the Apostles nipped this ugly trend in the bud. Nevertheless, Christian missions in the 21st century is confronted by this challenge. The Christian church needs to arise in the same way as the Apostles to address the problems of tribalism and sectionalism emanating from cultural diversities.

The Challenge of Meaning: The challenge of meaning is another factor in Christian missions. There is a need to contextualize the gospel to overcome the problem of meaning. Alan Tippett queried, "When pagans accept the gospel, what do they take it to mean? Does it mean the same thing to foreign advocates as to the indigenous acceptor? There are theological problems of expressing theological concepts in the pre-Christian terminology...or do you invent new vocabulary? If it is so, it is a

foreign imposition."³² The gospel must, therefore, be contextualized for proper understanding and assimilation.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of cultural diversity cannot be divorced from Christian missions. This is because several entities have a culture that is peculiar to them. It has been like this from Bible times. The early church witnessed this as it witnessed a great turnout of believers not of Jewish extraction. The Church has the task of dislodging these barriers to reach out to people effectively. To achieve this, missionaries must engage in culture and language learning to understand the cultural milieu from which they operate.

As noted, the challenge of tribalism and its forms should be highly discouraged. Promoting one tribe at the expense of another or others in a multicultural setting is an invitation for crises. There should be a level playing ground for all. Leadership positions should not be an exclusive prerogative or right of a particular section of people. More so, the gospel message needs to be contextualized so that those evangelised will not find it difficult to understand and adapt to the demands of the message. Christian missionaries should, therefore, make a conscious effort to bridge the gap created by diverse cultures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following are recommendations that could be considered for further discussions:

1. Missionaries who engage in cross-cultural missions are to pay attention to the culture and language of the target group.
2. Tribalism and sectionalism should be discouraged in its entirety.
3. Teachings on Christian missions should give more emphasis to cross-cultural missions.
4. There is a need for the gospel to be contextualized.

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³². Tippett, Alan. *Introduction to Missiology*. (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1987), 105.

³¹. Flemming, 120.

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