

The Place of Respect for Culture in the Dissemination of the Gospel

Abstract

Culture is an integral part of human life; hence it is important to take cognizance of people's culture in all spheres of life including religion. This is because every religion is born into a culture. However, the failure of most Christians in appreciating the culture of their host by interpreting the gospel within their cultural context poses a big challenge in the dissemination of the gospel. Hence, it is pertinent to understand people's culture since the contemporary society is multi-cultural. This paper sets out to bring to the fore the place of culture in propagating the gospel; since the dissemination of the gospel is a compulsory command to all Christians. The work was analyzed using the descriptive narrative, it was discovered that understanding culture forms the prerequisite of a good propagator of the gospel; thus, cultural knowledge should constitute part of Christian teachings.

1.0 Introduction

Culture is endemic in every human being because it is a way of life, hence, showing resentment to any culture means despising the people. Ejizu (2007) sees culture as means of social integration. Therefore, understanding the culture of a people is very essential and indispensable for the proper dissemination of the gospel within a locality. The gospel is believed to be the good news of salvation for mankind through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Perkins 2008). Those who believe in this good news of salvation are called Christians (Acts 11:26). According to the Bible, having believed in the good news it is expected of all Christians to go out into the world and spread the good news of salvation to all tribes and tongues without exception which implies all cultures of the world (Mathew 28:19).

The importance of respect for culture in the dissemination of the gospel cannot be overemphasized because of the role culture play in communicating to the people through practical examples which will aid understanding by reason of using familiar phenomenon which the people are used to in their environment. Ejizu (2007) brings this to bear as he maintains that religion and culture are intricately interwoven because they mutually interact and influence each other. But this was not taken into cognizance during the pre-colonial era when the missionaries came into Africa with the gospel as they exhibited so much disrespect for African culture; In the past 'you were not a Christian if you did not wear coat and tie and trousers; you were not considered a son of God if your name was not Jack or Robinson, Jones, Stone or Drinkwater' (Akin www.pctii.org.org/wcc/akin96.html). Christians were subjected to saying the catechism, flout traditional laws, burial devoid of full traditional compliments and imposition of English names,(Egbe 2014) another example of disrespect for culture was shown by a Capuchin Missionary *"On my way, I found numbers of idols which I threw into the fire. The owner of these idols.....seemed very annoyed. To calm him down by humiliating him, I let him know that if he persisted in anger, I should see that he himself is burnt with his idols"* (quoted in Akin www.pctii.org.org/wcc/akin96.html) this shows great disrespect in the dissemination of the gospel.

Christians should realize that the contemporary society is very complex; hence, requires people that will understand the complexity of the society in order to thrive. This implies that Christendom needs

people who are culturally versatile to go into the complex society that is multi-cultural to spread the good news of salvation to mankind. Furthermore, it is important that Christians should have a grasp of the relevance of culture in the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is because culture is the womb of every religion (every religion is born into a culture) (Ejizu 2007); Christianity inclusive, more so, the Bible was written and transmitted in different languages. The Almighty God also has regard for culture that is why He brought Jesus Christ through a respected culture, Mathew 1:18-25 records that Jesus was born through a betrothed young lady called Virgin Mary. The culture of Israel was that a young lady though betrothed remains a virgin until her marriage was consummated since the birth of Jesus was prophesied to come from a virgin in Mathew 1:23 and Isaiah 7:14. Therefore, adequate knowledge of culture forms the pre-requisite in the qualification of a grounded Christian preacher and not just knowledge of the Bible.

The need for effective dissemination of the gospel in this contemporary time is the challenge of this paper, as the spread of the gospel has been hampered due the attitude of modern Christians; further to this, modern Christians fail to learn from the errors of past missionaries who denigrate the culture of their host, using European culture as standard for Christianity. Also worthy of note is the fact that, when propagators of the gospel tend to undermine the culture of a place; the intended audience naturally becomes uninterested in the message as they consider them as enemies rather than friends (Ubong, 2012; Boka, 1991; Pobe, 1984; Twesigye 1996; Greig,1993).

The objective of this work therefore, is to bring to the fore the importance of strategic application, appreciation and understanding of basic cultural values in the dissemination of the gospel. Since the command to spread the gospel of salvation of Jesus Christ according to the Bible is mandatory for all Christians irrespective of age. However, the introduction of Christianity made the mistake of believing that to become a Christian people had to be “removed from their indigenous culture” (Moyo 1983 www.pctii.org.org/wcc/akin96.html). According to Mbiti (1971) the mistake of the early missionaries was, therefore, not that they preached the Gospel through a culture that they were familiar with, but that they first discredited the African culture before preaching the Gospel. Consequent upon this, Christianity was turned into an ideology which could be used to convince people to accept white domination; it was used to sustain and promote cultural *cum* political oppression, thus Bourdillon (1990) noted that Missionary Christianity cannot only be identified with colonialism. It is appalling to note that many of these sentiments can be found in contemporary Christianity among the leaders of different religious groups through their actions and inactions such as acting like foreigners in their own land, using the Bible to talk down on the people thereby subjecting them to do their biddings, building relationship based on money, making unnecessary demands from the people, masters and servant relationship etc. which are reminiscent of the missionaries’ attitude. (Adrian Hasting 1966). In recent times Christians are made to change their surnames believed to have ‘satanic’ connotations; for instance, *Nwagbara to Nwachukwu* (Egbe 2014) These actions did not help the propagation of the gospel instead it gave rise to religious syncretism in religious beliefs today; What Bishop Desmond Tutu described as a "form of schizophrenia"

(www.pctii.org.org/wcc/akin96.html accessed 15-2-2016) Thus, it is important to respect and appreciate cultures different from ones' own in the quest for carrying out the command. Reason being that Culture is an aggregate of what the people are associated with, it is like a mirror which reflects a people or a group, whose responsibility is to ensure its perpetuity because it is an instrument of self preservation which is acquired over the years. Hence, people do not toy with their culture to avoid its extinction; hence, culture thrives with a given natural or ethnic environment (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2010). However, when a person shows respect for the culture of his host, he will have easy access and free interaction with the recipients. Thus, the knowledge of the norms and values of the hosts becomes imperative to minimize the difficulties to reaching out to the people with the gospel.

From the biblical point of view, the work of spreading the gospel is the responsibility of all; it is therefore expedient for all Christian to desire to have a fair knowledge of the culture in the environment where they find themselves in order to spread the gospel especially if it is outside their cultural domain. That is why at the point of conversion to Christianity, a person is given the charge to go into the world and preach the gospel to all Nations (Mathew 28:19). Jesus Christ was very versatile in the culture he found Himself; His knowledge about the environment he was ministering to; helped him immensely in the proper dissemination of the word of God. The above narrative is a proper description of the life style of Jesus in ministry, thus, he also wants Christians of all generation to be culturally friendly if they must succeed like He did.

The descriptive narrative methodology was employed in this study as it provided the framework for the understanding of the dynamics of gospel dissemination of cultural diversities. This is because it is an approach that gives explanation of events and experiences (www.roanestate-edu/.../descri...). More so, the descriptive method gives clear description to the phenomenon under study (Sandalowski 2000), for this reason, it is very appropriate for this study as it creates a platform for the researcher to describe the phenomenon. (Giogi 1992, Wolcot 1994)

2.0 Biblical Understanding of a Nation

Biblically, the word NATION means people or ethnic group not a sovereign country with government and boundaries. Nation has its origin from a Greek word called 'ethnos' which is translated as 'nation', 'ethnic group' or 'people'. (Azar, 2013)

God's plan for man in Genesis 2:28 was to replenish the earth and not to remain in a particular location but to spread to different environments and terrain. This implies that God's plan for man was that man should have divers culture by reason of their different environmental experience and survival strategies. This was clearly seen in Genesis 11:1-9 as man out of his limited knowledge wanted to confine God's plan to staying together in a single high-rise building (Tower of Babel) to show how culturally selfish man was, God shattered the plan of man and cursed man to have divers language as well as culture. Therefore, it cannot be said that the unity in Genesis chapter 11 to build a tower was a compliment for the children of God at that time but a complete negation of the plan of God for man.

Furthermore, the understanding of nation is made clearer in Genesis 12, (the call of Abram) God said "I will make of thee a great nation, I will bless thee and make thy name great" this brings to bear the

fact that in the context of the Bible God looks at a people or nationality and not a place of fixed borders or stable government. This explanation can also be better understood in Genesis 25:23, “Two nations are in thy womb and two manners of people, the elder shall serve the younger. Definitely, God was not talking about a multitude of people in the womb of a woman; He was referring to the two different individuals (Esau and Jacob). So when Jesus said Christians should make disciples of all nations, He did not mean that they must go to a politically defined entity or country but to peoples, tribes, languages and kindred. So, if these people’s way of life is not being respected it will be a very difficult task for Christians to perform one of their primary obligation which is to preach the gospel as commanded by the Bible. The implication of Mathew 28:19-20 “Go ye therefore and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost”. Is that nation has to do with people or individuals because a person cannot baptize nations, government or borders, one cannot also teach nations. Ubong, (2012) maintains that “it is possible to allow the gospel to wear the attire of the recipient, speak their language and dwell among them without losing its integrity and dignity”. More so, the gospel will make more meaning to the recipient if it communicates its concepts using the people’s local concept and language (Pobee, 1998).

Therefore, it can be concluded by saying that the understanding of Nations in the Bible is ethnic group, peoples, groups or even individuals as recorded in Genesis 25:23. Thus, Christians who are under obligation to disseminate the gospel should note that people have their different ways of life which they have lived with all their lives; hence, should not be denigrated in the guise for spirituality. This according to Ubong (2012) is because early Christian missionaries presented Christianity as European religion condemning everything that is not European instead of adapting or using the hosts’ culture as its stepping stone to revelation. Every interpretation given to biblical teaching and texts had to wear European colour for it to be authentic even when the spirit behind such expressions are not properly expressed to the host community. Certainly, there are some cultural practices which are inhuman such as the killing of twins, human sacrifice, burial of a king with the youngest wife or servant, etc. Christians should make their host see reasons why they should stop such practices and not outright or forceful enforcement to stop or condemnation of the people. It is important to note that the gospel always comes in a culture but when it got to Africa it was shrouded in the European linen with its attendant implication. (Ubong, 2012, Pobee, 1984)

3.0 Understanding Culture

It is imperative to understand that there are typologies of culture which are visible and non-visible. They are called material culture and non-material culture. This is very crucial to explain so that those outside the field of cultural study will understand that certain immaterial phenomenon which are easily undermined constitute culture. For instance, language, names, values, etc.

Material culture consist of all the artifacts (material product) of the society, they include tools for the comfort of man; examples are shelter, clothing, weapon etc. All the invention of man in a particular locality constitutes their material culture. Conversely, non-material culture consists of the ideas behind the making and transformation of material object for man’s use, it also include the norms,

values, beliefs etc. Owete (2013) posit that culture is very important as it aids human survival by meeting fundamental needs hence it is needful to consider the basic characteristics and nature of culture.

Prominent among the characteristic is that culture is universal, the universality of culture connotes that culture is found everywhere in the world, so Christians who propagate the gospel should expect to see people behave in certain ways when they go out to places outside their domain, nobody can run away from culture, it is eminent hence, Christians should have an open heart in order to make progress in the dissemination of the gospel. Another important fact to note is that culture is particularistic. This implies that certain cultural traits are specific to some cultural group. Adequate knowledge of this practice will help the Christian preacher not to get into trouble. More so, culture is adaptive; which means that man can adapt or adjust to any culture to suit the condition of his existence. Thus Christians should be ready to adjust to the different culture they find themselves in as much as it not injurious to their Christian faith. Culture makes provisions for human beings to adapt to new conditions of their existence (Owete, 2013). Furthermore, culture is learned; it can be learnt by any person that is ready to learn a new way of life. The learning of a new culture depends on an individual's determination to learn something different from his own way of life for the purpose of survival and adjustment. One can learn another new way of life because culture is not biological or hereditary. It is mostly learnt through oral tradition and practice.

Other characteristics include; culture is shared, symbolic, integrated etc. The characteristics of culture as stated above according to Owete (2013) are very significant if man must survive in a particular environment. More so, the physical environment forms the root of every culture, (Ijekeazu et.al 1985) for this reason, Christians should appreciate the environment they find themselves in order to achieve the purpose of their mission.

Having established the fact that culture is the way of life of a people which sometimes is different from one's own, the attitude of Christians is to display basic understanding and appreciation of their host because they are to interact and live with the people before they can reach out to them. This also implies that Christians have respect for their host culture; respect according online English Dictionary is defined as an attitude of consideration or high regard. Thus, consideration for people's way of life will serve as a veritable tool for reaching out to the people.

4.0 The Need for Cultural Knowledge

Ubong (2012) pointed out the consequence of ignorance of relegating culture in the dissemination of the gospel as he assert that Christian missionaries who brought the gospel Africa in eve colonization presented the gospel with European culture and World-View and used European theology as the only acceptable theology thereby condemning everything that is not European instead of adapting or using the culture of its host as basis for Christian teaching. Every Biblical text was made to wear European garb for it to be authentic. It is good to know the event of the past and the attendant shortfalls, this according to Farfunwa (1974) a people without the knowledge of their past are suffering collective amnesia. For David (1996), the inability to grapple with the culture and world-view of their host

constituted a setback in appreciating the gospel by the recipient; hence, the gospel must be contextually presented if it must make meaning to the recipient. Stated below are the reasons why Christians should have cultural knowledge.

- a. Knowledge of culture creates a sense of belonging with the people one is interacting with.
- b. Knowledge of culture makes a person have easy access to the recipients.
- c. Knowledge of culture makes the people feel appreciated and loved.
- d. Knowledge of culture helps a person to survive in a foreign environment.
- e. Knowledge of culture enables a person to enjoy his/her stay in the foreign land.
- f. Knowledge of the culture makes the gospel propagator a good Christian (replica of Jesus) because Jesus knew the culture of the people he was addressing very well. Hence, he made good use of it in his sermons.
- g. Knowledge of culture makes the people understand the preacher easily because he can make good use of their parables and familiar stories which will enhance assimilation.

5.0 Importance of Culture to Man

Consequent upon the fact that culture is an integral part of man, it is imperative to take cognizance of the importance of culture even in the spread of the gospel. This according to Hesselgrave (1991) is because effective evangelism is contextual evangelism; therefore, the approach to evangelism must change from culture to culture. For instance, in music the gospel takes up the culture's instruments, draws from culture's repertoire yet creatively provides tunes which express biblical principles. As a result, culture is important to mankind due to the reasons stated below:

- a. Culture provides a world-view to man: this means that culture makes life meaningful to man and creates a survival strategy for man. It is the lens through which man see and interpret the events in the world.
- b. Culture teaches people how to live together as rational beings.
- c. Culture provides a common ancestry and history to a people. Knowledge of common ancestry creates a strong bond with the people; thus, they want to always support themselves to excel to position of honour in the society.
- d. Culture provides a sense of belonging and security to its members: people of the same cultural group are always ready to defend themselves against any form of oppression. This is because culture makes them see themselves as people of similar identity.
- e. Culture provides people with a common language: language defines a people and gives them the power to think and reason logically. Language makes it easier for people to share secret information, ideas, skills, knowledge, values, taboos and cultural beliefs.
- f. Culture serves as an organizing force which assists in bringing people together to seek for a common goal.

In summary therefore, every culture be it modern or medieval has its ways of life and religion is one of those ways. Thus religion is an indispensable element of culture. It should also be noted that each culture has its own personality. No culture is superior to the other, all culture are at best relative; what is acceptable to one group may not be acceptable to the other (Okodudu 2007 in Owete 2013). The fact that Christians believe that man is created by God does not mean that man every where is the same; therefore, to ignore culture would mean ignoring God's own beautiful work of multiplicity of languages and cultural diversity as recorded in Genesis 11:1-9.

6.0 Facts about Culture in the Dissemination of the Gospel

The spread of the gospel demands dialogue between Christian and non-Christian religion in order to give a Christian foundation to the culture of the host community. This according to Eliot (1968) is

called a process of ‘thought transfusion’ through this process the host community begins to imbibe and appreciate the gospel which will result to a growth of Christian faith in the host community. In addressing Christian Missionaries Eliot maintains

that the process of pastoring the Christian flock must recognize that cultural difference in the evangelization of the gospel is a mature sign that same faith can be expressed in diverse cultures..... some missionaries by thinking that the unity of faith automatically meant unity of culture or uniformity in the expression of the faith did a lot of harm to authentic cultural values.

In the same vein Robinson, (2005); maintains that it is imperative to know all about a particular culture in order to be able to plant the seed of the gospel in the hearts of one’s intending audience. This is very important because it is not easy for a person to abandon his culture in the guise of believing in a new ideology, it takes a gradual process which needs patience from the person who is trying to sell the new idea. More so, bible messages will be made more intelligible if it is transmitted in the native context of the audience (Onibere, 1978). Hence, it becomes very important to note that the Bible faith contains universal application and as such, the Christ-event should be presented to every recipient within their socio-cultural context (Wotogbe-Weneka, 2005).

Onwubiko, (1992) posit that Jesus the embodiment of the gospel was born into a culture lived that culture and used it to announce his message of salvation. He knew that the transmission of the Gospel depends, to a large extent, on cultural dynamism which links successive generations with their past through their present to their future. He knew that the authentic development and expression of the Christian life cannot be achieved through a “static” culture or through a totally new culture imposed from the outside. His mission to culture and through culture is summed up by the fact that He came not to abolish the law and the prophets but to perfect them as recorded in Mathew 5:7. “in the early Church the Graeco-Roman cultures became the solvent for the gospel, so much so that Jesus became so Greek and so Roman that he could not have been recognized as a Jew” Pobee (1984). When the church entered Roman Empire, she embraced the imperial culture, absorbing its symbols of authority, language, institutions, legal systems and military terminologies. However, there was a replacement of idolatrous festivals with Christian celebrations. The birth of Christ, Christmas, was celebrated in place of the birth of the “sun-god” in Mithriac religion, G.A. Arbuckle in Onwubiko (1992).

7.0 Short-Falls of the Past Gospel Propagators

History of the past construction would help subsequent scholars to avoid the faults of earlier generation, (Fafunwa, 1974) using the missionary work in Africa as a case study. A cursory study of some shortcoming of past missionaries is necessary. They are as explained below;

- a. The discriminative nature of the European missionaries made them concentrate the gospel within a particular domain which is among the royal palace of kings. The kings accept the gospel because of the benefit from the association with the missionaries. Their failure to associate with all and sundry in the spread of the gospel resulted to a great setback as the

rulers which they felt would command everybody to turn to Christianity disappointed them. (Toyin F and Biodun A. 1983)

- b. Subsequently, the European missionaries that spread the gospel were distracted by trade. Commercial enterprise over took their zeal for evangelization. Thus, the missionaries confined their activities to the coast. (Toyin F and Biodun A. 1983)
- c. The inability of the European missionaries to wholly accept the people and their way of life made it difficult for them to preach the gospel. Furthermore, the climatic condition of Africa which was too harsh for them made it difficult for some of them to stay healthy as most missionaries fell ill and some also died. The situation was compounded as a result of their ignorance of the fact that acceptance of culture aids survival strategy in a strange land. (Toyin F and Biodun A. 1983)
- d. Another factor that constituted a setback in the dissemination of the gospel by the European missionaries was the failure to differentiate between Western Culture and Christianity. This is because every religion is transmitted through local culture. According to Ehioghae, (2005), religion and culture have always cohabited, thus, trying to separate the two elements in the same milieu is virtually impossible. This act of using European culture as a standard for Christianity in African impeded the growth of the spread of the gospel in Africa as it was difficult to uproot the African culture and plant the Westernized culture.
- e. Also of note, is the failure of the European Missionaries to indigenize Christianity. They insisted that Christianity must remain Western in practice. This practice was expressed in music/songs, dressing, names, liturgy and the use of indigenous manpower. Everything about Africa which include marriage, religious practice, moral and customs were seen as barbaric (Twesigye, 1996).

8.0 Way Forward

Having, examined the short-falls of past missionaries it is expedient to look at steps to consider in the dissemination of the gospel.

Christians should be considerate or show regard in relating with their host because it is difficult to understand the people's joy, problem, poverty, hunger, ethnicity and the general way of life. This is very important because the early missionaries did not consider this aspect of having good interpersonal relationship with the people hence it was very difficult to reach their recipient.

More so, Christians should be vast and knowledgeable in the stories of the Christian Bible in order to appropriate it to the daily lives of the people. This will make the event of the Bible become real to the listeners, thus it will be easy to accept.

Christians should also appreciate the people as much as possible in order to earn reception from the people. This is because the Christianity that was given to Africans was a mixture of biblical values and the general social values of Western society (Yusuf, 1999). Therefore, in the Greaco-Roman World the prosperity of Christianity was as a result of the marriage of the Jewish and Greek concept which gave birth to Hellenistic concepts (Pobee, 1984).

The author hereby summarize the following as the way forward in ensuring the proper place for respect of culture in the effort to disseminate the gospel to diverse cultures in our global society.

- a. Adequate knowledge of culture is critical to the success of modern Christians to actualize the charge of propagating the gospel to all nations.
- b. Communication of cultural dynamics and diversities should be encouraged among Christians.
- c. The biblical understanding of the word Nation connotes people or ethnic group not sovereign country with government and political boundaries.
- d. Cultural appreciation in Christendom makes one a good propagator of gospel as typified by Jesus Christ, Paul the Apostle and other successful missionaries to other cultures.
- e. God Almighty is no respecter of persons, which connotes that God recognizes the people's Culture and have no preference.

9.0 Conclusion

Failure in appreciating basic cultural values in the dissemination of the gospel has been a challenge both in the past and in the present because it makes non-Christians to see Christians as fanatics and imposters, that is, people who want to force their way of life on others. The non-Christians see it as uprooting their own culture and implanting a new one. Since nobody is ready to trivialize his/her culture, and/or value system that has been held in high esteem for ages, there is always resistance. This is exactly what the Europeans did to Africans when they brought the gospel in the pre-colonial era. They faced strong resistance from Africans because they saw Africans as primitive and barbaric. They condemned the African way of life; in fact they wanted a replication of their homeland. Hence they never succeeded in their first missionary journey (Falola and Adediran, 1983).

The multi-cultural nature of our society requires adequate knowledge of culture before embarking on the propagation of the gospel. However, modern day Christians seems to neglect this aspect of knowledge which constituted a set back during the era of the European Missionaries to Africa. Conversely, among the Greek and Roman where the gospel was contextualized within their cultural milieu it prospered. Hence, it is imperative for Christians of today to appreciate the environment they find themselves if they must fulfill the great commission that is handed over to them by Jesus Christ. They should also know that the son of God is universal; however, in his incarnation He became part of a particular culture which is the Jewish culture. He did not wish to *absolutize* this particular culture (Boka, 1991).

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