
PAULINE APPLICATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF GOD IN ATHENS: A VIABLE STRATEGY FOR DISCIPLESHIP IN AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

African societies are known to have a strong worldview that embraces the belief in gods, ancestors' worship, and mystical powers which may bless or curse. The worldview affects Christians and non-Christians since both consult mystical powers in times of need and crisis. This paper aims to establish a method that may help Africans rely on God of the Bible. The trajectory of this paper follows Pauline mission's entrance in Athens. It discusses the influence of biblical view of God on discipleship, how Athenian's view of God affected their discipleship, how African's view of God affects their dependence on God of the Bible, how Paul introduced God to the Athenians, and how Pauline's application of the doctrine of God in Athens can help in developing a strategy for discipleship in the African context. The paper reveals that the view of God has impact on discipleship. While biblical view of God leads to the worship of God of the Bible, African and Athenian views of God lead to pantheistic and polytheistic view of God which accommodates the worship of gods. It concludes that the strategy that Paul used to introduce God in Athens may be applicable for discipleship in African context.

Keywords: African View of God, Athenian View of God, Biblical View of God, Discipleship, Doctrine of God.

Introduction

The objective of the great commission recorded in Matthew 28:19-20 was to make disciples of all nations. Discipleship according to the book of Acts led to the mission strategy which focused on church expansion from Jerusalem to different geographical locations. This move was empowered by the fulfillment of the promised power of the Holy Spirit who enabled the disciples to break the immediate language barrier during the Pentecost scenario. Moreover, the empowerment of the Holy Spirit aimed to remove both the cultural and the spiritual barriers (Park, 2009).

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When it comes to African context, the church under the influence of early church fathers such as Clement and Origen established mission in Alexandria, Egypt on the northern part of Africa. However, the church grew mainly in Europe and did not penetrate the southern parts of Egypt which is the large mass of the African continent (Masuku, 2003). In later centuries, western churches through their mission activities in Africa did not accomplish much in terms of eradication of unbiblical cultural practices (Masuku, 2003).

Since every society has its cultural practices, African societies have been known to have a strong worldview that embraces the belief in divinities and mystical powers which may bless or curse. This worldview affects Christians and non-Christians because both consult mystical powers in times of need and crisis (Amanze and Makinde, 2011). These practices affect their dependence on God of the Bible and fall into idol worship. Thus, the worldview suggests that there should be a strategy that will orient Africans to the God of the Bible and be able to build their relationship with Him in their contextual setting. Therefore, this paper aims to find a strategy for discipleship that may fit the African worldview from the study of Pauline application of the doctrine of God in Athens.

The trajectory of this paper follows the Pauline mission's entrance in Athens. For a conclusive discussion of the issue, this paper aims to answer five key questions. First, how can biblical view of God enhance discipleship? Second, how did Athenian's view of God affect their discipleship? Third, how does Africans' view of God affect their dependence on God of the Bible? Fourth, how did Paul introduce God to the Athenians? Fifth, how can Pauline's application of the doctrine of God in Athens help in developing a strategy for discipleship in the African context?

This paper involves literary approach to research that employs bibliographic data. It employs descriptive, analytical, and complementary methodologies in five sections. The first section describes biblical views of God and its influence on discipleship. The second section describes the Athenian's view of God and its consequences on discipleship. The third section describes the African's view of God and its effects on dependence on God of the Bible. The fourth section gives an analytical discussion on how Paul introduced God to the Athenians. The fifth section complements Pauline's strategy and discipleship in the African context.

Biblical View of God and Its influence on Discipleship

Christian theology hangs on the fundamental teaching of God's existence (Erickson, 1998; Canale, 2000). The Bible, Old and New Testaments affirm that God exists. This claim is established by empirical proof of God's self-revelation. Scripture reveals that God is a self-existent and personal being who transcends the entire universe (Hodge, 2005). His being is accepted by faith which is informed by reliable evidence found in Scripture and nature (Berkhof, 1941). The opening page of the book of Genesis assumes the existence of God who made the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1,2). Again, Scripture informs that the creation declares the glory and handiwork of God (Psalms 19:1) which reveals His majesty and goodness because He upholds and sustains all creatures.

Viewing the nature of God, Scripture unveils His essence through communicable and incommunicable attributes. Communicable attributes refer to transitive qualities that are shared with humans. Explaining these qualities, Norman Gulley (2011) brings in the idea of God's self-impartment. He means that, though God is transcendent He is also immanent for He comes closer

to humans and imparts His communicable qualities which are summarized in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

Incommunicable attributes refer to the intransitive qualities which describe God's self-existence. These qualities describe the being and majesty of God which include Independence (Joh 5:26; Rev 4:11), Omniscience (Psalm 147:5; Hebrews 4:13), Omnipresence (De 4:39; Psalm 139:7–10 Pro 15:3), Eternity (Psalm 90:2; Isa 40: 28; Revelation 1:8), and Omnipotence (Gen 17:1; 18:14; Job 42:2; Isa 43:13). They also distinguish the nature of God as a self-existent being from the nature of other creatures as created beings.

In addition to God's attributes, the names of God as used in Scripture reveal His immanence and love towards humanity. Wayne Grudem (1994) comments that the names of God are not mere titles but they give descriptions of His character. Scripture informs that the names of God were directly associated with His actions as the creator and sustainer of all created beings. Proverbs 18:10 states that "The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous run to it and are safe." This text notifies that the names of God reveal his love and protection whereby those who make Him a refuge get a source of strength and protection (Psalm 46:1-2).

Major names that come out vividly in the Old Testament are Yahweh and Elohim. However, from these two, other names are introduced. These include *Adonai* (Lord, Master, or Owner, Psalm 8:1), *Jehovah Nissi* (the Lord is my banner, Isaiah 40:31), *Jehovah Rapha* (the Lord who heals, James 5:14–15), *Jehovah Shamma* (the Lord is there, Matthew 18:20; 28:20), *Jehovah Roi* (the Lord is my shepherd, Psalm 23; John 10:11), *Jehovah Tsidkenu* (The Lord our righteousness, Psalm 23:3), *Jehovah Shalom* (the Lord is peace, Romans 5:1), and *Jehovah Sabaoth* (The Lord of Hosts, Psalm 46:7). Others include *El Elyon* (most high God, Gen 14:20), *El Roi* (the God who sees, Gen 16:9-11), and *Emmanuel* (God with us, Isa 7:14; Matt 1:23; Heb 4:15-16). The meaning of these names in the mind of the Hebrews enhanced their discipleship because they were drawn to worship and to depend on Him. The Psalmist categorically said "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1). The Psalmist supplies an idea that, knowing the majestic nature of God influenced the Hebrews to depend on Him in matters that required supernatural intervention. In addition to this, God's direct interventions to individuals enhanced their dependence on Him and were confident to face challenges for they believed in Him. Some of God's interventions that enhanced individuals' dependence on God include God self-disclosure to Moses in the burning bush (Exo 3), to Gideon at the oak which was in Ophrah (Judges 6:11-24), to Hanna who was barren (1 Samuel 1), to David when he was keeping his father's flock (1 Samuel 17:34-37), and to Isaiah in the sanctuary scene (Isaiah 6:1-8). These incidents led these individuals to revere God and were in constant worship of God who revealed His majesty in their life experience.

In connection to Old Testament' names of God, the New Testament also has names that reveal the nature of God who deserves worship. These include *kris* (Lord, Romans 10:9), *Despots* (Master, Ruler, 2 Pet 2:1), and *Abba* (Dearest Father, Romans 8:15). These names are linked to the Old Testament names and are applied to the members of the Godhead in the New Testament (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Scripture informs that God exists as a relational Trinity which means that God consists of three eternal, divine, equally self-existent Persons as one God (Gulley, 2011). The evidence of the existence of God in three persons implicitly emerges in Old Testament

and explicitly revealed in New Testament. The Old Testament shows plurality using the plural phrase “let us” (Gen 1:26; 11:7; Isa 6:8). In the same connection, the New Testament explicitly unveils the members of the Godhead as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This information is categorically revealed in the events such as the birth of Jesus (Matt 1:18-23; Luke 2:26-35), Jesus’ baptism (Matt 3:16-17; Luke 3:21-22), and Jesus’ great commission statement (Mat 28:19-20). Moreover, the epistles inform that the members of the Godhead are involved in the work of redemption (John 3:16; Roman 5:5; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 6:23; and Jude 1:21).

In the same note, the New Testament reveals God as the master and dearest father who wishes to redeem his children from the shackles of the devil (John 3:16; Luke 4:18,19). He is also a God who hears and sees the pain and troubles of His children who are suffering from distress and diseases and deliver them because He is Almighty, and nothing is impossible for Him. This work was revealed in the ministry of Jesus Christ which in turn became the driving influence for discipleship. Ellen G. White (1988) affirms that:

Christ’s method ALONE will give true success in reaching people. The Savior mingled with [people] as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘follow Me (p.143).

The statement clarifies that the nature of God which is manifested in His works towards humanity through the ministry of the Son has great impact on discipleship. It unveils that the application of God’s majesty, immanence, and loving character influences people to follow Him.

Athenians’ View of God and Its Consequences to Discipleship

Athens was the capital city of Greece in Paul’s time. In biblical times, the city was the center for philosophical discussions of which most of its ontological views followed the Greek philosophical views (Gulley, 2003). These views did not allude to the concept of revelation of divine attributes from Jewish monotheistic view (Soskice, 2006), but employed classical philosophy to explain the nature of God. Some Greek philosophers who come to the forefront are Parmenides (c.540-470 BC) who recognized a being that is timeless and immovable; he also mentioned other beings who reside in time (Gulley, 2011). Plato (c. 427-347 BC) suggested the *Timaeus* theory of creation which describes the timeless God who created the universe in the immovable time, therefore, the immovable and eternal God created movable and temporal things (Plato, 1981). Aristotle (c. 384-322 BC) who viewed God as eternal and immovable who is separate from sensible creatures (Gulley, 2003).

Consequently, God’s nature was characterized by impassible, immovable, self-sufficient, and eternal attributes (Gulley, 2003). Some of the issues that resulted from this conclusion include the view that denies God’s creation from nothing “*Creatio Ex Nihilo*,” denial of God’s supernatural acts, and a view of a transcendent and immovable God who has nothing to do with human life (Canale, 2000). As a result, these views ended in the belief in polytheism, pantheism, and nihilism (Lam, 2015).

Bible informs that when Paul went to Athens, he encountered Greek philosophers, Epicureans, and Stoics (Acts 17:18). On one hand, the Stoics approach to ontology was not based on the faith found in Scripture but deduced its logic from observations and impressions of the

cosmos which led to belief in pantheism (Odor, 2016). On the other hand, Epicureans were the followers of Epicurus (c. 342-270 BC) who founded a philosophical school in Athens. Out of this school, Epicureanism introduced a philosophy that pronounced that knowledge is closely linked to power and claimed to offer true knowledge of the way things are (Tomlin, 1997). Based on knowledge, whoever came with different views was received with suspicion (Acts 17:18,19). This philosophy believed on the existence of gods and taught that the human mind is disturbed by the fears of gods and death which may be overcome by exercising happiness (Tomlin, 1997).

Therefore, the Athenian's view of God hangs on the philosophical background of the time whereby God was approached in the polytheistic and pantheistic manner which led to the belief in gods who resided in houses and presented by graven images. This belief is evident in Pauline statement:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands... we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill (Acts 17: 24, 29).

The philosophical view of God in the city led the Athenians to develop the worship of gods (Acts 17:16), a belief which also anticipated to discover more gods as their search would permit (v.19). In this case, their allegiance resided on divinities which also pulled them to the expectation that there should be a god which they have not discovered yet, as a result of this, they put an inscription “to the unknown god. “Moreover, the pantheistic and polytheistic approach of God as viewed by the Athenians discarded their dependence on God of the Bible, instead, they focused their attention on images.

African View of God and Its Effects on Dependence on God of the Bible

African religious worldview is rooted in fundamental beliefs which include the Supreme Being, spirit beings, impersonal powers, divinities, and hierarchy of spiritual beings and powers (Turaki, 2006). This worldview centers its allegiance to these fundamental beliefs for it is believed that good life is connected to harmonious relations with these powers (Mathema, 2011). According to Hubert Bucher, these powers are arranged in a hierarchy of which God stands as the highest being who is followed by other divinities, ancestors 'spirits, and mystical powers (Bucher, 1980). Other respected entities include sacred days, right of passages, religious specialists, and traditional taboos (Nkuba, 1988).

Though the African context recognizes God as the creator of the universe (Mbiti, 2002), the worship practices are directed to mediums because God is assumed to be too far from everyday life (Mbiti, 2002). The view makes God to be an immovable being who works through lesser divinities. Mbiti observes that some magic specialists claim that the power which they possess comes from God (Mbiti, 2002). In this case, Africans believe that lesser entities are God mediators and are quick to respond to people's needs because they are closer to humans (Turaki, 2006). Consequently, African needs such as healing, business success, struggle for power, marriage, childlessness, peace, and fear for misfortune are directly referred to lesser entities (Amanze and Makinde, 2011). This tendency reduces their total dependence on God of the Bible, thus, justifies dual allegiance among Africans.

God in African view is rarely consulted on normal occasions (Gehman, 2002); instead, everyday life depends on lesser divinities that have been accepted as God associates in whom He manifests himself (Mbiti, 2002). Therefore, it is agreed that Africans are free to find blessings and solutions to their problems by practicing dual allegiance. This conclusion accommodates pantheistic, polytheistic, and animistic approaches to discipleship (Mbiti, 2002) whereby people are at liberty to rely on gods.

Pauline's Application of Doctrine of God to the Athenians

Most of Pauline's missions were centered in major cities where he met masses in marketplaces (Onongha, 2015). This strategy opened opportunities for reaching more people with the gospel. Athens was among the major cities where Paul had the opportunity for gospel proclamation. His style of discipleship in the city of Athens was positive in nature. He started with commendation by recognizing the worship desire of the Athenians (Act 17:22). This approach removes prejudices and creates room for acceptance. Commenting on this approach, Barnes (2000) says that Paul used respectful language for he did not want to begin his address in a manner that would provoke prejudice and opposition. On the same note, Ellen White (1988) comments that Jesus' approach for mission was colored with respect and concerns of His hearers. She says that the Savior mingled with people, showed His sympathy and won their confidence. She also commented that gospel workers should not rush on accusing those who are in errors for that will create resistance (White, 1974). In Athens' scenario, Paul did not focus on accusing the Athenians but put his emphasis on the gap that he could use to impart the truth (v.23).

Since the Athenian problem was rooted in the doctrine of God, their search for God was enthusiastic which ended in the wrong conclusion. Paul entered into their inner need for worship by explaining to them the God of heaven who deserves worship. He categorically said "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:23, NIV). This approach did not deny their need for worship but was a process of correcting the object of their worship.

Paul's explanation to the Athenians introduced the God of heaven who was powerful over all other idols in the city. He explained the attributes of God. First, God is eternal; He does not dwell in temples made by hands, but He is different from creation for He is non-historical while creation is temporal and historical (Canale, 2000). Second, God is self-sufficient; He has everlasting life in himself and He is the source of all lives (Gulley, 2011). Moreover, Paul explains God's divine activities which include creation and providence. God as creator is justified in v.26 whereby Paul narrates that God made all people and enabled them to dwell on earth. God as sustainer is justified in v.28 where Paul explains that "in Him, we live and have our being. Finally, Paul cemented his argument by quoting Athenian's poet "*as some of your own poets have said we are his offspring*" (v. 28 NIV) in support of his explanation.

In conclusion, Paul declared that the greatness of God is above all graven idols. This God will judge all according to their rejection or acceptance of salvation through Jesus Christ. Paul's introduction of God of the Bible led to the conversion of some Athenians, among them were Dionysius and Damaris. Despite the criticism of this strategy as Sampson M. Nwaomah (2016) reports, the Pauline mission in Athens should be measured by discipleship lens which does not focus on an overnight event but by a long process of conceptualizing a message

by the indigenous. Since religion is an innate phenomenon, many converts may not be the immediate results but the response of accepting the message is gradual and should be a continual discipling of the indigenous within their context.

The conversion of some Athenians in Paul's mission was within their context. John A. Gration (1983) describes that conversion is contextual by nature, for it embraces cultural settings including the religious domain in which a person is living at the time of conversion. He categorically commented that "God does deeply respect persons as individuals and meets them in their context" (p. 157). Therefore, Pauline's mission in Athens was not out of this principle. He found Athenians within their established beliefs which required critical contextualization. In this process, Paul had to respect the Athenian need for worship, but he was also obliged to evaluate their practices and gave them the challenge to examine the object of their worship. In so doing, he quoted their source in support of the worship of God the creator and sustainer of all (v.28).

Commenting on critical contextualization, Hiebert Paul concludes that unbiblical religious practices of the society should be replaced by biblical alternatives (Hiebert, 1984). Pauline's strategy in Athens was grounded in this standard by giving the alternative to the Athenians concerning the object of worship. He specifically changed the object from worshipping idols to the worship of God the creator (v. 27).

Applying Pauline's Application of Doctrine of God in African Context

The doctrine of God heralds religious practices of societies. The doctrine of God determines how people formulate their religious beliefs and practices (Canale, 2000). In the case of Africans, their polytheistic view of God leads them to have lesser divinities. They have also formulated the practice that rejects the immanence of God in their daily lives. For them, God is rarely consulted because he is too transcended therefore, his power can be accessed through intermediaries which include divinities, ancestors, and spirits (Mathema, 2013). This situation resembles the Pauline scenario in Athens. The Athenians had a polytheistic view of God; therefore, they ended in worshipping graven images. In this case, the strategy that Paul used to introduce God may apply to Africans who experience a similar situation. The following strategy may be followed.

Respect the Local Religious Practices

When Paul entered Athens, He observed that the city was full of idolatry, but he did not despise the practice at the first glance, but he focused on the positive act of their worship zeal. Since religion is an innate lifestyle, lack of respect to someone's religious practice may end up in prejudice and opposition. Discipleship in the African context may adapt this manner of approach purposely to trigger acceptance.

Identify the Point of Entry

Paul did not introduce God anyhow, but he identified the gap which he could use to introduce God in a better way. This point is categorical. Verse 23 states, "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So, you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you" (NIV). Since the Athenians had no idea on the inscription "to the Unknown God" their philosophical setting of looking for new ideas triggered a need which mandated them to listen to Paul's preaching. In the same manner, identification of a gap can be an appropriate point of

entry in discipleship in the African context. Though Nwaomah warns that presenting God of the Bible as superior to African gods may not be the effective way (Nwaomah, 2016), the emphasis of this approach is to look for a gap that may be used as a way of providing solutions for the needs of Africans.

Integrate the Local People in Evaluating their Religious Practices

In the process of introducing God as the creator and sustainer of all, Paul integrated the Athenians by quoting their poet to strengthen his point and to introduce the greatness of God above the graven images which in turn challenged their idol worship. Following this trajectory, discipleship in the African context may apply this method by incorporating African belief in the Supreme Being in challenging their dual allegiance. Since African societies believe that the Supreme Being (God) stands on the top of the hierarchical order (Turaki, 2006), they may be challenged by introducing this God who requires allegiance to himself and who is willing to bless those who approach Him.

Apply Critical Contextualization

Paul's method replaced the unknown god with God the creator. He removed the old practice of worshiping the unknown god and replaced the vacuum by introducing God the creator. In the same vein, discipleship in the African context should be contextualized whereby the non-biblical religious practices may be replaced by biblical religious practices.

Conclusion

The leading questions in this study show that the God of the Bible is different from Athenian and African views of God. While the Bible reveals God as the creator and sustainer, who is both transcendent and immanent, Athenians and Africans hold on to a transcendent being who has little concern for humanity, and who can be accessed through lesser divinities. These views led to different impacts on discipleship. While the biblical view of God led to the worship of God of the Bible, African and Athenian view of God led them into idolatry because of their polytheistic and pantheistic approach. The Pauline mission in Athens presented the nature of God as the sovereign creator, self-sufficient, sustainer, who is both transcendent and immanent. He did this after he recognized a gap which he used to introduce God of the Bible over Athenian gods. This paper has shown that Pauline's application of the doctrine of God can be applied in Africa. Like Paul who introduced God to the Athenians at their point of need, discipleship in the African context may use the gap of African need for peace, fear of misfortunes, diseases, destroying mystical powers, infertility, and curses by presenting God of the Bible who is able to settle their problems.

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