

**PAULINE AREOPAGUS ADDRESS IN ACTS 17.16-34 AS A PARADIGM
FOR CONTEXTUALIZING THE GOSPEL IN AFRICA**

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Abstract

Paul's gospel presentation to Areopagus in Acts 17:16-34 is used as a paradigm for contextualizing the gospel in Africa. Contextual analysis is used to review the text in its given context to relate it to the contemporary situation. Contextualization captures in method and perspective the challenge of relating the Gospel to culture. The article discusses Paul and Hellenistic pluralism. Religious people have objects of worship that constitute "religion," which relates with deity. This paper is a reading of Acts 17 through the lenses of African religious context. It examines how Paul's description of the Athenians as "very religious" had led to educate them on, "unknown God." The process of "contextualizing the gospel" traces back to the New Testament. Paul's Areopagus' speech is one of the most instructive case studies in New Testament contextualization. It surveys several aspects of Paul's missionary communication, portraying how the formula of the speech is directed to convince an intelligent and philosophically minded Greek listeners. It depicts how Paul did not assume a combative posture, but with admirable delicacy, challenged and rectified the major positions of the Stoics and Epicureans, while being sensitive towards the Athenians. Simultaneously, Paul declines to compromise the non-negotiable gospel tenet, especially Christ's resurrection, which challenges the Athenian worldviews. The treatise reflects on how this paradigmatic story can inform the task of incarnating the gospel in pluralistic settings like Africa today and a guide to minister to them in their own background. Consequently, contextualization of the gospel is recommended to African cultures.

Keywords: Paul's address, Areopagus, Gospel, Contextualization and African Culture

Introduction

This work focuses on Acts 17:16-34 which can operate as an edifying case study in contextualizing the gospel for a particular listener. Paul's sermon to the sophisticated and philosophically oriented Athenians in Acts 17 is feasibly the outstanding instance of cross-cultural missionary preaching in the New Testament. The main argument of this article is that Paul's encounter with

Athenian people, riddled with deities and ideologies, could be used with some adaptations to offer strategies for proclaiming the gospel in our contemporary society. It is obligatory to conduct a fleeting tour of the religious backdrop into which the Apostle Paul ventured. The state of affairs in Athens and our existing situation will accordingly be discussed, followed by lessons from Acts 17 as a paradigm for evangelism. Paul was realistic in the testimony of the gospel in Athens. Charles sees this truth proven in Paul's insistence on "*creatio ex nihilo* and bodily resurrection, the core of the Christian *kerygma*."²⁰

There has been an explosion of interest from around the world in the theory, the process, and the problems linked with the contextualization of the gospel. The term "contextualization" was coined in the 1970s, the activity that can be thought of as "contextualizing the gospel" has been a vibrant of the Christian mission from the beginning. we can unearth the roots of contextualization in the New Testament itself as the church struggled with how the gospel could be freed from an exclusive identification with Jewish culture and incarnated anew into a primarily Gentile setting or with how to work out the ramifications of the Christian message in light of the solid needs of the several mission communities in the Greco-Roman world. Significantly, these New Testament patterns are parallel to those necessary for the effective contextualization of the gospel in every generation. Such scriptural models bid us to ascertain paradigms that might inform, guide, and suggest parameters for the continuing task of enabling the gospel to come to life in new settings.

Hellenistic Idolatry-pluralism

The era from Alexander to Augustus, 330-30 B.C., is branded as the Hellenistic age²¹. The term Hellenism refers to "the expansion of the Greek language and culture and, most of all, the establishment of the Greek's political domination over other nations of the east"²². The manner by which Greek culture rose to the point of supremacy is fundamentally ascribed to the conquests of Alexander the Great (356-323). Prior to Alexander, Greece expanded through the establishment of new colonies. Though, the Persians held the title of the leading world power. When Alexander conquered the Persian king, Darius III, at Issus in 333 B.C., the balance of power in the Mediterranean domain rolled to Greece. However, Alexander's

²⁰ Charles, J. D. Engaging the (neo) Pagan mind: Paul's encounter with Athenian Culture as a model for cultural Apologetics (Acts 17.16-34). *Trinity Journal*, 1 (16): 47-62, Spring, 1996, 54.

²¹ E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 1.

²² H. Koester, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*. Vol. 1. (New York: De Gruyter, 1982), p. 39.

swift death leapt the Hellenistic empire into civil war, with Alexander's successors, the Diadochi-battling, for total control. Nonetheless, Hellenisation grew under the Ptolemaic and Seleucid kings. The Greek language became the *lingua franca* of the terrain from Rome eastward²³. The power of the Greek Empire steadily deteriorated and by the first century it surrendered power to the Roman Empire. Yet, Greek influence endured because of the synthesis of Greek and Roman cultures. The Graeco-Roman or the Hellenistic world of Paul was a time of philosophical multiplicity and more significantly, religious syncretism²⁴.

The chief and most apparent sign of the religious pluralism of Paul's day was the existence of the imperial cult. The ancient Greeks worshipped as many as 30,000 gods. Sloan sketches concisely a possible reason for this antagonism, the masses of pagans were polytheists. In Paul's missionary tour, he found many cases of established cults in honour of many members of the pantheon. Zeus was famous in many cities as well as Laodicea, Lystra and Pergamum Acts endorses that Zeus was a patron deity in Lystra. Paul came to Lystra where he healed a lame man (Acts 14:10). The people were persuaded that Paul and Barnabas were gods who manifested as men (vs. 11). They acknowledged Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes (vs.12). As there was a priest of Zeus in Lystra implies the presence of the cult of Zeus in the city (vs. 13)²⁵. Additional affiliate of the pantheon with extensive support during Paul's period was the cult of Artemis (Roman Diana). She was the many-breasted goddess of fertility, who had mystical powers to heal²⁶. Besides the archaeological evidence, the words of Demetrius, the silversmith who opposed Paul's evangelism in Ephesus, signifies her fame in Asia (Acts 19:27).

The most popular in the Hellenistic world was Dionysus or Bacchus, the god of wine designates the vital element of this cult: The festivals jubilated in honour of Dionysus differ from place to place, but it appears that one common feature was the emphasis on fertility and sex. The stress on the phallus (the male sex organ) in the so-called 'Phallus Procession' along with such things as 'the Phallus Song,' surely show the libidinous debauchery allied with this worship. The implication was plainly to gratify Bacchus so that he would grant fertility²⁷.

Contextualizing the Gospel in Athens

²³ Ibid, p. 42.

²⁴ Ibid, 164.

²⁵ Sloan, R. B. *Religious Background to the New Testament*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), P. 509-523.

²⁶ Trebilco, P. Asia. (In Gill, D.W.J. & Gempf, C. eds. *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*. Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 291-362.

²⁷ C. L. Rodgers, "The Dionysian Background of Ephesians" 5.18 *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 136 (543): 249-257, July, 1979.

In Athens, the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers among others participated in Paul's homily. The immediate background for Paul's address is the meeting of the Areopagus, the ultimate governing council of Athens, which had obligation for determining religious enquiries. Paul confronted some sort of endorsed trial or hearing, he was given opportunity to present his innovative teaching to this influential body of foremost inhabitants (17: 19-20). Moreover, Luke's narrative of the retort to Paul's speech indicates that there was a broader attending audience, comprising a lady called Damaris who converted to Christianity (17:33-34). Undoubtedly, Paul delivers his homily to philosophers, the council and conceivably other inquisitive inhabitants (17:22). It is imperative for coming to terms with the criticism of prevalent Athenian religion in his dialogue, exclusively since the Areopagus is the actual assembly that is accountable for religious stuffs²⁸. Paul transforms the occasion of complete misunderstanding of his preaching and the subsequent demand for an explanation into an opportunity to proclaim the gospel afresh in the very epicenter of Greek thought and culture.

The reason Paul was provoked in his spirit lies in the circumstance of the city. Luke uses the adjective, *thick with idols*, to explain the extreme polytheism of the city. Paul's first view of Athens possibly comprised the 500 feet hill, which towered over the city upon which the temple of Athena was erected. Athens was named in honour of the goddess Athena. Throughout the Graeco-Roman world, Athens was known as the centre of art and philosophy²⁹. The Stoic and Epicurean philosophers were not Paul's only addressees. The direct background for Paul's sermon is the meeting of the Areopagus, the supreme governing council of Athens, which had obligation for determining religious questions.

Convincing approach

The form and style of the Areopagus address are skilfully reformed to persuade a cultured Gentile audience. In contrast to the recurrent use of language and references from the Old Testament that we find in sermons addressed to Jews in Acts (e.g., 2: 14-36; 13:16-40), this treatise reveals a more Hellenized style that is appropriate to its occasion and hearers³⁰. Luke portrays Paul as lecturing the council with rhetorical skill and thoughtfulness. Standing before them to convey his address, Paul adopts the position of a Greek orator (17:22). He unlocks with a

²⁸ Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*. Vol. 2. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 216-217.

²⁹ H.C. Kee, *To every Nation under Heaven: The Acts of the Apostles*, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), p. 209.

³⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 383-384.

conventional form of address for a discourse in Athens (Men, Athenians), empowering his addressees immediately to feel at home. The oration itself suits the conventional form of Greco-Roman rhetoric. We can perceive the following rudiments: firstly, an opening *exordium* or prologue, planned to gain a hearing from his hearers (17:22-23a); secondly, a proposal (*propositio*; 23b) asserting the preferred goal of the discourse-to make the unknown God known to the Athenians; thirdly, the foremost *probatio* or proof (24-29), which debates the case; and fourthly, a closing *peroratio* or exhortation (30-31), which tries to convince the audience to take the right course of action; that is, to repent (17:30).³¹

Since Paul was in the midst of a somewhat confrontational setting in which he must elucidate and defend his teaching about "foreign divinities," the speech has elements of judicial oratory. However finally it takes the charisma of deliberative rhetoric, which strives to influence the audience to amend their beliefs and their manners. Paul "decrees?" to the Athenians (17:23) a message they need to perceive and grip. Moreover, Ben Witherington III³² discerns that the speech appears to follow the common form in ancient rhetoric of first inaugurating the speaker's ethos or personality, then presenting logic in the form of influential arguments, and lastly using pathos in verses 30-31 in order to breed a passionate reply from the onlookers. For the sermon to be operative in persuading people to transform, it must engross them not only on the level of their intellect, but also their feelings. Paul's sermon features a variety of rhetorical techniques that would have been familiar to educated Greeks." One such strategy is the use of the delaying tactics of "insinuation" (*insinuatio*). Paul postpones the difficult subject of the resurrection of Jesus to the very end of the oration (17:31), after first establishing rapport and building a foundation for understanding. Paul also quotes pagan poets-authorities recognized by his audience-in backing his argument about the rapport of humanity to the living God (17:28). This does not depict that such pagan sources carry the same weight of authority for Paul as do references from Scripture in sermons to the Jews³³.

Preliminary Initiative

³¹ M. L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts* (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 96

³² Ben III. Witherington, *The Acts of Apostles: A Social Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 513-518, 156.

³³Tannehill, pp. 214-217.

Comparable to their regional counterparts in Lystra (Acts 14:8-20), the refined Athenians have no knowledge of Christ or, respectively, the Scriptures upon which to build. Accordingly, to lead them through Israelite history and to talk about Jesus as the assured Jewish Messiah, as he does with the synagogue devotees in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16ff.), without hesitation have made diminutive sense to *this* throng. In its place, in 17:22b-29, Paul launches into a classic case of what today we might call “pre-evangelism.”

Paul inaugurates his discourse with an *exordium* that creates relationship and reliability with his listeners. It was routine for Greek orators to gain the friendliness of their spectators by familiarizing their statements with a *captatio benevolentiae* (currying of favor), as Paul does in 17:22b, 23a. At this point, the opening idea of contact is the religiosity of the Athenians themselves: “I see how extremely religious (*deisidaimotesterous*) you are in every way” (17:22b). While the term *deisidaimotesterous* can at times mean “very superstitious,” it is possible that Paul uses it in a neutral and non-judgmental logic³⁴. Originally, Paul takes a reverential and to some extent conciliatory approach to his listeners' pagan religious life. He additionally involves his listeners by illuminating a solid example of their worship that he has witnessed, an altar to an unknown god (17:23a). Doubtless such altars were projected as “safety precautions,” stirred by the fear of offending and incurring the wrath of an unknown deity. In line with a local myth, for the period of a plague in which no sacrifices had well pleased the gods, Epimenides of Crete advised the Athenians to release a flock of sheep on top of the Aeropagus. Where the sheep clogged, altars were erected to unnamed gods, and the city was spared³⁵. Though it is not known whether Paul was aware of this local tradition, it clarifies a mutual fear of unknown powers among the Greeks. Paul's mention of the altar to the unknown god thus ascertains a fundamental religious need of his audience. Simultaneously, it identifies the subject of “knowledge,” which is extremely esteemed within their culture. The Athenians' worship of the *unknown* serves as a catalyst for Paul to liftoff into his evangelistic message about the one true God who is *known* because this God has shown himself. Moreover, the allusion to the altar label allows Paul to build reliability with his addressees by eradicating the doubt that he is attempting to present

³⁴ Foerster, Werner, “Very Superstitious, etc.” In *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 2. G. Kittel, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 20.

³⁵ Hemer, Colin J. “The Speeches of Acts II: The Areopagus Address.” *Tyndale Bulletin*. 1989, 40: 245-246.

foreign deities to Athens (cf. v. 18): the God he preaches is not *totally* unknown to them³⁶.

Accordingly, Paul arises where his listeners are and constructs as much common ground as is conceivable. Instead of disapproving their belief system or reproving their religiosity, he identifies there is something sincere in their religious goals and felt needs, and he utilizes them as stepping stones for communicating the gospel. There are positive boundaries, nevertheless, to the strategy of common ground.

Paul's Constructive and Corrective Commitment

Paul states his rudimentary plan about the "unknown God" in 17:23b, then advances it through several apologetic arguments in verses 24-29. His explanation is chiefly *theo-centric*. It centers on God's personality, revelation in nature, and relationship to humanity. This appears to be Paul's typical approach to people devoid of a biblical legacy (cf. 14:15-17). Precisely, he is turning the unknown God, the God of the Scriptures, *known* to his audience. It is remarkable that Paul does not react instantly to the Athenians' precise inquiries about "Jesus and the resurrection" (17:18). First he must speak to them at the level of their simple belief expectations, creating an indispensable context and basis for preaching the risen Christ.

Does Paul embrace his message to the philosophical ideas of his pagan audience? Martin Dibelius replied with a definite, yes. He argued that this is essentially a Hellenistic speech about the true knowledge of God that everyone possesses by nature, a line of thought that is "foreign to the entire New Testament".³⁷ Observed from this viewpoint, Acts 17 turns out to be a model of *over-contextualizing*, where the Lukan Paul has surrendered the Jewish Christian gospel at the altar of Greek philosophy so as to make points with the Athenians. Alternatively, there are those who reason that Paul's classifications come exclusively out of the Old Testament and Judaism, that he unveils no points of agreement of any kind with his hearers, only disparities. Neither of these opinions appears to do justice to Paul's contextual methodology. Whereas it is right that the dialogue's theology is inflexibly rooted in the Old Testament and Judaism, Paul is able to clothe biblical revelation in the language and kinds of his Greek hearers without syncretizing the message³⁸. He

³⁶ Zweck, Dean. "The Exordium of the Areopagus Speech, Acts 17. 22-23." 1989, *New Testament Studies* 35: 102-103.

³⁷ Vielhauer, P. "On the Paulinism of Acts." In *Studies in Luke-Acts*. L. E. Keck and J. L. Martyn, eds. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966, 34-37.

³⁸ Charles, 53.

takes benefit of conjunctions between the Jewish Scriptures and Hellenistic thought in order to build apologetic bridges to his addressees. Paul sees Greek philosophy as an applicable dialogue partner in his effort to contextualize the Jewish Christian gospel for his educated contemporaries³⁹.

Paul's scheme in Acts 17 comprises both constructive and corrective or remedial engagement of his hearers' beliefs and worldviews. This is applicable to what Colin Herner says, "a fascinating study in cross-cultural communication, in building bridges where possible without shirking the necessity of dialogue on points of basic disagreement, while seeking to meet those issues where the questioner is, on his own ground and terminology"⁴⁰. Paul discovers his main touch points in the Stoic teaching that is conversant to his audience. Actually, Paul may have wilfully gone after a conservative sketch for a Stoic arrangement on the nature of divinity (131, 136). Not shockingly, Paul portrays an image of the true God in worldwide strokes as the God of the whole world who has politely unveiled himself to all of mortality through creation.

Evangelistic Application

Paul's discourse attains its peak in verses 30-31. Rhetorically, his end accomplishes two things. It guides his listeners to the theological pivotal theme toward which the whole discourse has been structuring the declaration that Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead, will be Judge of the world. This accomplishes the specified goal of the dialogue (17:23b) by making the *unknown God known*, now in a further detailed way in the person of Jesus. On the other hand, it charms his addressees to take the accurate course of action. They must repent of their idolatry and be appropriately linked to God through Christ. To this juncture in the discourse, Paul the orator has considered to identify with his onlookers, underlining a number of facts for contact and agreement. Except at this juncture does he bring the Athenians man to man with the core of the gospel, God's saving action in the risen Christ, as he takes up conversant leitmotifs that manifest in other evangelistic sermons in Acts (e.g., 2:38; 3:19-20; 10:42)⁴¹. The need for repentance in both beliefs and attitudes, which the first part of the discourse forestalls, now turns out to be excruciatingly simple to the Athenians.

³⁹ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Acts of Paul Apostles*. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 319.

⁴⁰ Herner, Colin I. "The Speeches of Acts II: The Arepagus Address." *Tyndale Bulletin*, 1989, 40: 239-247.

⁴¹ Soards, 99-100.

God's new and conclusive work in Jesus means that "all people everywhere" need to be remorseful and repent (17:30). That comprises educated philosophers as well as pagan idolaters. Paul's discourse, is fundamentally a call to repentance, a call for the Greco-Roman world to break finally with its religious past in reaction to the one God who now invites all to be part of the transformed world. Thus, the knowledge of salvation at work here is not purely an issue of cleansing and transmitting the pagans' natural knowledge of God, as some have thought⁴². Consistent with the sermon, what is required is not education, but transformation. The subjects specified in verse 31 as the purpose the Athenians must repent are end time judgment and the resurrection of Christ, both of which pose a barefaced challenge to Greek thought. The idea of a coming divine judgment at the finale of history upsets the Stoic notion of time as moving unceasingly in cycles. Indeed, The Judeo-Christian knowledge of the past, which begins and ends with divine consent, marks a strong break with the world view of Paul's audience. Furthermore, the view of judgment in righteousness denotes that Paul's listeners are ethically answerable before God. Their "ignorance" (17:30) is obviously not delight. They must return to the knowledge of the Creator they have acknowledged with repentance and conversion. The speech closes with the declaration that God will righteously judge the world by "a man" whom he has chosen and raised from the dead (17:31)⁴³.

Paul's Areopagus Address (Acts 17) as a Paradigm for Contextualizing the Gospel in Africa.

Contextualization expands our understanding of the Gospel because we now see the Gospel through a different cultural lens, this is the hermeneutic challenge. Hence Africans are much "religious" like those in Athens communicating the Gospel must start from everywhere they happen to be. In contemporary Africa, the Gospel must be taken to doorsteps through missions and evangelism. Ukpong, has invented the phrase "African Inculturation Hermeneutic (AIH) which supports contextualization of the gospel in Africa." He avers that the Bible is the primary and basic source for the development of African Christian theologies. Justin Ukpong takes this all a step further in his article "Rereading the Bible with African Eyes" when he speaks of the significance of the interpretation of the

⁴² Vielhauer, 36.

⁴³ Charles, 59, 61.

Biblical text having practical relevancy to the everyday life of the African⁴⁴ (3-14). By so doing, in another work Ukpong recommends for African theologians the method of inculturation, which he designates as “a dynamic on-going process by which people consciously and critically appropriate the Bible and its message from within the perspectives and with the resources of their cultures.” This, he says, would “make a specifically African contribution to biblical interpretation and actualize the creative power of the Bible in African society⁴⁵.”

Manus avers some of the historical-critical questions relevant to Acts 17:16-34. He determines that his main nervousness with regard to the Areopagus discourse is, “what approach does Luke's Paul adopt in evangelizing sophisticated Athens?” He argues that “Luke's text has ... a special appeal for developing churches of Africa and beyond.’ He asserts such, since the Areopagus address, “presents us (i.e. Africa) with a model worthy of emulation for mission in Africa where the inhabitants are still as much 'religious' as the Athenians of antiquity.” Manus extracted six motifs from the address. They are: first, since Luke does not let Paul to quote many O.T. proof-texts from prophecies, which would be unacquainted to the heathens. Therefore, if he utilizes any at all, he incorporates it in his arguments on natural revelation, choosing instead for direct quotations from local poets and wise men. Second, since Paul does not argue from “first principles,” but rather from the perspective of biblical revelation. Third, since the Paul of Acts preaches from the “known” to the “unknown.” Fourth, since from the dominion of God and his knowability as creator of all things Luke's Paul leads to a theological anthropology. Fifth, since Paul's subsequent level, after coming to a theological anthropology is to show the Athenians- that God’s final drive in giving human beings the earth is that they might seek and find him because they are his progeny. Then, lastly, since the pinnacle of the speech is a call to submit to God who has disregarded humanity's past ignorance⁴⁶. In consequence, with these six facts in mind, Manus opines, “Throughout the length and breadth of Africa especially prior to the advent of Christianity and even now in many remote villages there existed and still exists several shrines (altars) and idols kept and patronized by devotees of Traditional Religion.” It is, then, the duty of the missionary either Western or African-to address the Gospel to these people beginning from

⁴⁴ Justin S. Ukpong, “Rereading the Bible with African Eyes: Inculturation and Henneneutics,” in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 91 (June 1995): 3-14.

⁴⁵ Justin S. Ukpong. “Inculturation as Decolonization of Biblical Studies in Africa”. *The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies*, Ibadan: 2005, 17.

⁴⁶ Manus, Ukachuku Chris, “The Areopagus Speech (Acts 17.16-34): A Study of Luke’s Approach to Evangelism and its Significance in the African Context,” *ATJ14* (1985), 13-14.

anywhere they happen to be. As Manus records, "Luke's address enjoins us (i.e. Africans) to proclaim the Gospel to the modern African from his 'known,' namely, from his native religious culture- to the Lordship of our Lord, Jesus Christ." Also, Christian missionaries should gather from the Areopagus speech the fact that ""the employment of 'quotable quotes' from folk literature proves that heathen wisdom supports Christian interpretation and contextualization." Thus, Manus concludes, "From Luke's approach, we must come to a realization that the Gospel of Christ liberates man and assists him to express his faith within his local ambiance⁴⁷.

According to Olowola "there are good things in African traditional religion, which any Christian theology relevant to Africa must take into serious account. One example is the African belief in a Supreme Being."⁴⁸ This trait of African belief is a significant factor in efficiently teaching about God in Africa, and offers an additional argument for a theology of Christian education in Africa. That is, there is the necessity to make Christian theology available and plausible to Africans through the standard of effective teaching. It entails that an African theology of Christian education must be instituted on Bible-based theological proposals in African perspective. Christian education in Africa would then be the way of teaching such a theology. That is why in another piece, Olowola says, "each theologian is bound to communicate the truth so that people can understand it. It is when teaching and learning transpire that people can be said to have understood truth. In Africa, this entails that the African world view, rooted in African culture, be taken into consideration in communicating theological truth. The gospel reflection needed by the life of the modern African Christian community, as that community pursues to fulfil its calling under God within its context."⁴⁹ Africans need a gospel or a theology that is authentically African.

The familiarity or knowability of God is not new to Africans. Idowu affirmed this concerning the Yoruba that "In all things they are religious." This raises great possibilities for communicating the Christian faith to the Yorubas because "Christianity, by its unique and universal message, stands the best chance of fulfilling that which is implied in the Yoruba concept of God."⁵⁰ It illumines that at many points the Christian idea of God rhymes with the African thought, such as in the idea of God's authority and omnipresence. Mbiti supports the validity of a dissimilar theological approach for Africa on the facts that, however not much

⁴⁷ Manus, 14-16.

⁴⁸ Olowola, Cornelius. *African Traditional Religion and the Christian Faith*. (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1993), p. 63.

⁴⁹ Cornelius, Olowola. "Towards an Evangelical Theology" in Africa. *ETSI Journal*, 2, 1996, 15-21

⁵⁰ Bolaji, Idowu. *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (Ibadan: Longman Nigeria Limited, 1962), pp. 5, 215.

had been written by African theologians by 1979, “as far as oral theology is being done by the masses of Christians in Africa, and largely in African languages, it is a genuine creation of African Christians (and) ... forms the foundation and basis for the development of African theological output.”⁵¹ Africans are encouraged to produce materials to meet the needs of the church in Africa. To convey the gospel to Africans there is need to contextualize theology to be understandable to Africans. By way of Kato “Africans need to formulate theological concepts in the language of Africa. But theology itself in its essence must be left alone.”⁵² In line with, Onaiyekan, that “the burden of the African exegete would be to examine the word of God and apply its message to the realities of the here and now.”⁵³ The aim is not to change the essence of theology, but to contextualize it to benefit Africans. This means that the African educator needs to understand the African context in seeking to teach Africans the ideas put forward by the theologians. Biblical scholarship in Africa has undergone even more current advances. This motivation is triggered by S. O. Abogunrin that, “the quest for new ways of interpreting the Bible in Africa is not only legitimate, but also an important part of the development that will lead to authentic Christianity in Africa.”⁵⁴ He contends that African biblical scholars need to decolonise biblical interpretation by responding to their religiously and culturally pluralistic context. In another work he argues, the process is helped by the fact that “the Bible is more real to the peoples of Africa (than Western peoples), not because they cannot reason scientifically, but because most of the things described in the Bible still happen around us daily.”⁵⁵ Therefore, for Abogunrin, “The task before biblical scholars in Africa is for a Christology that is authentically African, but which is at the same time catholic and from which Christians from other continents can draw lessons, inspiration and encouragement.”⁵⁶ All this is possible because African culture is so similar to Jewish culture, making it possible for Africans to understand biblical realities.

The deeper emphasis on contextualizing the gospel in Africa is seen conspicuously in Turaki who asserts, “The need to indigenize Christianity became a rallying cry

⁵¹John S. Mbiti, “Cattle are born with ears, their horn grow later: Towards an Appreciation of African Oral Theology”. *African Theological Journal*, 8, (1) 1979: 25.

⁵²Byan, H. Kato. *Biblical Christianity in Africa*. (Achimota: African Christian Press, 1985), p. 12.

⁵³Onaiyekan, John. “Current Biblical Hermeneutics in Africa”. *African Journal of Biblical Studies*. Xvi (1): 4-6.

⁵⁴S. O. Abogunrin. “General Introduction”. *Decolonization of Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Biblical Studies Series* number 4. Ibadan: The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2005: 90.

⁵⁵S.O. Abogunrin. “Biblical Healing in African Context”. *Biblical Studies Series* number 3. Ibadan: The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2004: 9.

⁵⁶Eunice, Abogunrin. “An Analogous study of the death of Jesus Christ and the deaths of some African Heroes”. In *Christology in African Context: Biblical Studies Series* number 2. Ibadan: The Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies, 2003: 17.

of some African theologians and scholars, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Their primary objective was to strip and rid Christianity in Africa of all its Western striplings and coverings and replace that with what is African. The goal of indigenizing Christianity, as it was hoped, was to make it look more African and rid it of all its foreign elements. These advocates had a strong belief that Christianity in Africa was brought under the cover of the Western culture and for this reason; African culture should be made to replace Western culture”⁵⁷ (Turaki 93). This undertaking was more intensified in the area of theological language and all its thought categories, which must be stripped of all Western thought categories and also be replaced by African thought categories. Christian worship in its mode, form, content, music, liturgy, prayers, and places of worship should be given African moldings. Turaki stressed that “only the seed of Christianity has to be planted in African soil and when it germinates, it will grow into African Christianity”. The indigenization principle dispensed chiefly with the cultural contextualization of Christianity: the making of Christianity looks more African than Western. Christianity could be overruled on cultural grounds if it should appear more Western than African. Stress on cultural and political ideology made many Africans to throwaway Christianity. The effects of the Christian faith within the African context require the growth of a relevant theology that can address African cultural, religious and contextual questions⁵⁸.

Conclusion

Acts 17:16-34 is critical to the development of an approach for the contemporary evangelization. Paul teaches us that Biblical revelation is the pivot of evangelism. The seed of the message will oblige at least these twin aspects: God revealed and Christ risen. Paul did not adopt an antagonistic stance on the wrong positions held by his addressees; rather, he contextualized the prime positions of Stoics and Epicureans. Paul declines to syncretize his message or to diminish its dogmatic integrity. He absorbs Athenian culture with the goal of its renovation. He adds on his familiarity of the world of his listeners with the intention of critiquing meritoriously the wrong beliefs, theories, and acts that are entrenched in it. There are uncompromising variables in Paul's message that oppose the predominant conjectures of his addressees. These are the sovereign lordship of the Creator and Ruler of the peoples which entails that there are no other gods. Then, the general

⁵⁷Yusufu. Turaki, *The unique Christ for Salvation: The Challenge of the Non-Christian Religions and Cultures*. (Nairobi: International Bible Society Africa, 2001), 93.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 93-94.

necessity for repentance in relation to sin and guilt. Moreover, is the authenticity of an impending judgment that demands ethical accountability. Primarily is the ultimate revelation of God in Christ, certified by Jesus' resurrection from the dead which challenges the Greek thinking of death and immortality⁵⁹. Above all, both the Athenians and their worldview need to be transformed.

The church in Africa today can pick up from Paul's practice that realistic contextualization of the gospel necessitates thoughtfully and censoriously to involve a multi-ethnic world, while sidestepping the route of stress-free adoption to the overriding culture. This is the genuine way that people can be sincerely converted.

Paul's meeting at Athens unveils a model to African Christians with a viewpoint for contextualizing the gospel among people of other religions. In Paul's approach, even though troubled about the idolatry he discovers in Athens, Paul declines point-blank to denounce the pagans or their religious and philosophical thoughts. As an alternative, he familiarizes that the Athenians, their ancient, even their religious aims, have been affected by the grace of God. The discourse upholds that all folks are made in the divine image (17:28), that God has created them for the goal of pursuing him (17:27). Also, the thoughtfulness showed by Paul in Athens displays how the message can be conveyed appropriately to the modern civilization. Therefore, the overriding goal of contextualizing the gospel in Africa is making theology relevant in its application within context or to rip off its western elements in order to Africanized Christianity.

⁵⁹ Charles, J. Daryl "Engaging the (Neo)Pagan Mind: Paul's Encounter with Athenian Culture as a Model for Cultural Apologetics (Acts 17:16-34)." *Trinity Journal* 1995, 16:60-62.