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Decolonizing Biblical Interpretation: An Analysis of the Colonial Missionary Gospel and Its Impact on Entrepreneurial Development in Africa with Reference to Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

This research is an inquiry into the gospel which shaped the theology of missionary churches in general and the Methodist church in particular. It argues that missionary churches have continued to preach the gospel of embracing poverty which is a product of the missionary manipulated biblical interpretation. Data was collected through interviews from randomly selected members of the Methodist Church. Findings reveal that the missionary churches have not embraced the gospel of entrepreneurial development as the panacea to sustainable development. This paper therefore challenges the Methodist Church to develop a post-colonial interpretation of the bible which seeks to promote sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

Keywords: *Methodist Church in Zimbabwe, biblical interpretation, entrepreneurship and decolonisation*

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship development has become one of the topical issues that has continued to receive significant attention from governments, economists and the academic fraternity. In most of the developing countries entrepreneurship development is viewed as the engine for job creation and the panacea for economic growth. Researchers in Religion and Entrepreneurship have studied the nexus between religion and entrepreneurship, because religious beliefs and teachings plays an important role in shaping the perception and behaviours of the Society. Audretsch et al 2007 using evidence from India argues that religion shapes entrepreneurial decisions, they also noted that religions such as Islam and Christianity are conducive to entrepreneurship.

Given this strong relationship that exists between religion and entrepreneurship development this paper seeks to analyse the role that is played by the former missionary churches such as the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe in promoting entrepreneurship development as a solution to the country's economic challenges. This paper posits that besides all the attention that entrepreneurship development has received, little has been done in stimulating entrepreneurship development by the Main line churches in Zimbabwe. This study argues that the gospel which shaped the theology and the gospel of former missionary churches did not come to Africa neutrally since it was heavily influenced by the prejudiced missionary gospel which had a bias towards the colonial agenda. Hence there is an urgent need for these churches to reread and decolonise their biblical interpretation that was soiled by the missionary gospel's theological ideals that portrayed the church as a place for preparing people to go to heaven only.

The thrust of the paper is to show that the former missionary churches through their established structures and the use of the bible can play a very critical role in the promotion and stimulation of entrepreneurship development in Zimbabwe by tying entrepreneurial ideals to the proclamation of the gospel. The paper therefore makes special reference to the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe in its analysis of how the former missionary churches can play a significant role in the promotion of entrepreneurship development in Zimbabwe.

The outline of this paper is as follows. The paper first reviews literature on Methodism, missionary activities and their use of the bible to empower and disempower Zimbabweans. This is followed by discussions on decolonisation in the Methodist Church. Lastly the paper concludes with a detailed discussion of the papers contributions.

2. Methodology

In this study the researchers adopted the qualitative approach through interviews which were randomly selected from the members of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe. Brammer (2000:16) posits that qualitative research data helps to clarify hypotheses, beliefs, opinions, attitudes and motivations...qualitative work is often a first step because it enables a research to fine tune language. Discourse analysis method was used to describe data from primary (interviews) and secondary (published books, journals and newspapers) sources. The discourse analysis was used because it is content specific and have relevance and practical application at any time, place and people. It also reveal the hidden motivation behind a text. The research will also use biblical hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics refer to the science of interpreting. It is a branch of Theology that prescribe rules and guidelines by which the bible should be interpreted.

3. Zimbabwean Methodism: An Overview

An overview of the beginning of Methodism in Zimbabwe provides an entry point to an understanding of this study to those who are not Methodists. C.J.M Zvobgo (1991:23) observes that the origins of the Zimbabwean Methodism are linked to South African and British Methodism and that the first Methodist missions in Zimbabwe were founded by the Reverend Owen Watkins and Isaac Shimmin when they arrived at Fort Salisbury on September 29, 1891. It is noteworthy that the expansion of Methodism in Zimbabwe from South Africa and Britain must be understood within the context of the 19th Century Christian missionary enterprise as a whole. Many other Christian missionaries from the Roman Catholics and other Protestants denominations had already started to establish mission stations in Zimbabwe soon after the granting of the Rudd Concession and the formation of the Chartered Company in 1888. According to Madhiba (2000:14) Cecil John Rhodes offered an annual pledge of one hundred pounds and land for farms to the Methodist missionaries towards missionary work in the anticipated British colony. This therefore shows that the expansion of the Methodist mission in Zimbabwe was based on the benevolence and goodwill of Cecil John Rhodes.

This link between the Methodist missionaries and Cecil John Rhodes weakened the Methodist missionary's gospel as life giving considering that Cecil John Rhodes was pursuing an agenda of plundering and disempowering the Africans. Like many denominations the Methodist Church established a number of mission stations across the country which became the centres from which they emitted their gospel. It is however interesting to note that on 14th July 1897 Cecil John Rhodes laid the foundation stone of the Methodist Church Main Street in Bulawayo. This indeed demonstrates how missionaries and the state seemed to have been working hand in glove as stated by Rev Frank Noble

- “The policy which was initiated by Cecil Rhodes of Government and the missionary societies working in close cooperation has happily been continued. The present Government is continually showing practical sympathy with the activities and most of the ideals of missionaries... There is probably no part of the empire where a better feeling exists between the Government and the missionaries. Cabinet ministers and officials regularly attend our mission conferences” (Gray: 1928:47-48).

This policy obviously influenced how the missionaries applied their theology so that they could sing from the same hymn sheet with their compatriots in the government since theology is bound to be shaped by its context.

The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe attained her autonomy from Britain in 1977 and has remained as one of the largest Main line churches in Zimbabwe with an estimated membership of 114621 across Zimbabwe and a number of fellowship groups in the diaspora.

3.1. The Missionaries and the Bible

- “When the missionaries came to Africa they had the bible and we had the land .They said “let us pray” We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the bible and they had the land.” *Desmond Tutu*

This quotation in a few words captures the view that many Africans have towards the relationship between the missionary and the bible. Many Africans therefore are convinced that the Missionaries used the bible to advance the colonial agenda of exploiting and subjugating the Africans. It must however be acknowledged that although the missionary agenda was on evangelizing the Africans they shared with the colonial administration not only a similar cultural background but also a civilizing mission (Vastralean 2002). However it will be a misrepresentation of facts if we put all the missionaries in one bracket since there were a few who still remained focused on their intended mission of preaching the gospel although the majority supported the colonial agenda. We acknowledge that the role that was played by the missionaries in colonialism is a topic that has dominated the academic discourse in post-colonial Africa. However for the purposes of this research we shall pay special attention to the way the missionaries interpreted the bible as they evangelised in Africa.

3.2. The Bible as a Weapon of Subjugation

Musa. W. Dube posits that the scramble for Africa was the scramble for Africa through the bible. This view by Dube is very fascinating as it depicts how the bible in the hands of the missionaries is viewed by many Africans in the post-colonial Africa. Vengei (2012:84) concurs with this assertion when he noted that the bible has been an influential weapon to subjugate and to blind the African people so that they could accept slave status in their own land through translation and interpretation. It is therefore critical at this point to reiterate that the bible has always been a weapon of destruction or construction depending on whose hands it is in. The Zambezi Mission Record (1911:164) in its editorial is explicitly clear on how the missionaries used their gospel to subjugate the Africans:

- “The blacks are and must for generations to come remain the inferior race. It is our duty to raise them from the state of barbarism and heathenism but they should also be taught to submit cheerfully to the duty so long ago foretold ‘a servant of servant shall he be unto his brethren.’ If rightly brought up the servant native will submit to his lot, and though naturally indolent and irresponsible, he will work to the satisfaction of his employer, and manage to be happy and content himself.”

This editorial in a mission record is quite unequivocal about how the bible was wrongly used to pacify and dominate the Africans. The missionaries used the belief and assumption which they taught the Africans that the bible was God's word which cannot be questioned yet they were misinterpreting it to support their colonial agenda. The missionaries used the scriptures that glorified poverty deliberately ignoring those that talks about Jesus as the giver of abundant life in the here and now. Therefore biblical interpretation in the colonial era must be viewed within the socio- economic and political context of that time.

The letter that was written to the missionaries in Congo by King Leopold 11 of Belgium in 1883 clearly shows that the colonial missionary gospel and biblical interpretation was heavily influenced by the ideals of the colonial agenda. In this letter King Leopold stated that “Your essential role is to facilitate the task of administrators and industrials, which means you will go to interpret the gospel in the way it will be the best to protect your interests in that part of the world. For these things, you have to keep watch on disinterested our savages from the richness that is plenty in their underground” (Leopold 11 1883). King Leopold speaks of the essential role of the missionaries in Congo which was to interpret the gospel in a certain way which was set to achieve a certain agenda. This indeed makes the missionary the gospel a compromised gospel hence the need to decolonize biblical interpretation in the promotion of empowerment of the Africans. Leopold II also exhorted the missionaries to use their knowledge of the gospel to find texts ordering, and encouraging the Africans to love poverty, like “Happier are the poor because they will inherit kingdom of the heaven” and, “It's very difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.” In line with Leopold’s letter which represents to a large extend how the bible was wrongly used and misinterpreted by the Colonial missionaries a Dutch Reformed Church missionary at Morgenster would always quote Ephesians 6 verses 5-8 which buttresses the need for servants to be obedient to their masters (Tlou, 1975:195). Indeed the missionaries taught the Africans to embrace the theology of suffering so that they can endure suffering while the colonisers were enjoying themselves.

It important to note that although most of the main line churches moved to criticise the colonial system of racial discrimination they have however remained stuck with the colonial biblical interpretations which concentrates on saving the soul but promising a pie in the sky on issues of poverty and the struggle for economic justice and empowerment. Therefore biblical interpretation in Africa cannot be separated from the dark colonial history that is still mirrored in many areas of the African society in post-colonial Africa. This misinterpretation and manipulation of the bible by the colonial missionaries clearly illustrates that the bible has been and will always remain an authoritative text that can be used to influence people’s perceptions and mind-set. It is therefore our view that this same bible that was used as a tool of subjugating the Africans can also be one of the tools that can help the Africans to address the issues of poverty and sustainable development that traces their roots to the colonial injustices.

3.3. Decolonization in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

For the purposes of this study we shall refer to decolonization in two ways, that is as a process that granted autonomy to the Zimbabwean Methodists from the British Methodist and as a methodology of doing theology. As earlier on noted in this study the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe operated as a district under the British conference since its inception delegates would attend the conference in Britain to give reports on the Methodist work in Zimbabwe. In 1964 the Methodist Missionary society in London, mindful of the rapid political changes taking place elsewhere in African and in anticipation of similar changes in Zimbabwe, appointed the Rev Andrew Ndhlela as the first black head of the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe (Banana, 1991:131). This development ignited a lot of protest from the white Methodist community in Zimbabwe who could not accept to be part of church that is led by an Africa given their low opinion about Africa. This appointment of Ndhlela was followed by the granting of autonomy of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe from Britain in October 1977. This development meant that the Methodist Church had moved from being a foreign Church becoming a decolonized church, however the question this study seeks to answer is to what extend did the Methodist Church became a decolonized church? The granting of autonomy meant that the Methodist church in Zimbabwe could now make its own decisions and as expected starts the process of decolonizing their theology and biblical interpretation which was tainted by the missionary colonial bias.

The autonomy of the Methodist Church meant a lot of things as it was followed by the attainment of political independence by Zimbabwe from the British in 1980. This scenario created a conducive atmosphere for the Methodist to become an indigenous church that seeks to meet both the physical and spiritual needs of its people. Although the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe was born of a womb that was associated with misinterpretation and misuse of the bible the time was now ripe for the church to start the process of correcting the colonial mentality within its structures, membership and its biblical interpretation. By the time Zimbabwe attained independence the Methodist Church had managed to train a number of black ministers and Lay preachers who could communicate and interpret the bible in the local language. Indeed the Methodist church needed to be localised for it to be relevant in post-colonial Zimbabwe. However her theology has to a large extend remained foreign as it still falls short in addressing and giving answers to the pertinent questions the Africans still struggle with. To buttress the point that there was a need to reorient the Christian teaching in the church in 1981 Mr A Mabeza who was the vice president of the Methodist church in Zimbabwe called for a dialogue between Christianity and African Traditional religion (Methodist minutes conference: 1981). This call by a lay leader should be viewed as representing the concerns of many lay people in the church who felt that the church was still foreign to them even after the attainment of autonomy. There was need to transplant the gospel from the Western flower pots into the Zimbabwean soil so that it can start to bear its natural fruit.

3.4. Bible in the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe

The bible occupies a central place in the life and theology of the Methodist Church in line with the teaching of the founder of Methodism John Wesley. According to the Methodist teaching, Scripture is the sole source of absolute truth and is the basis of their theology (www.pfrs.org/foundation/wesley/pdf). To illustrate the centrality of the bible in the Methodist church an open bible is a common feature in the front of the congregation during worship services. Their theology and programmes therefore radiates from the way they interpret the bible. It is noteworthy that although the Methodist church has moved to work with the post independent government in Zimbabwe in the development of a better society condemning the ideals of colonialism, to a certain extend their biblical interpretation still mirrors the colonial imprints as it does not address the contextual issues that are affecting the people.

The Methodist Church inherited the tradition of using a lectionary in their worship services, a system that can be traced back to 1780. The Collins English Dictionary (2012) defines the lectionary as a book containing readings appointed to be read at divine services. The lectionary therefore provides the theme and bible readings for all the worship services following the Christian calendar. The Methodist church in Zimbabwe lectionary year begins with a Wesleyan tradition covenant Sunday on the first Sunday of the year followed by the period of Epiphany, lent, Pentecost and Christmas. These periods determine the texts and themes for each worship service. This system has an advantage of encouraging the Ministers and preachers to desist from repeating the same scriptures every week however it is important to note that the lectionary does not take the context into consideration. To what extent does the lectionary address current issues which are affecting the people in Zimbabwe such as unemployment and sustainable development? Commenting on the challenges that are caused by the lectionary Seventy percent of the people interviewed noted that many times the sermons do not address the current existential problems we are facing in this economic climate except for promising hope without offering tangible solutions.” These observations show that the system of using the lectionary which the church inherited from the colonial missionary church is not effective in a post-colonial African community, where people are seeking tangible answers to the existential issues of life. It must be acknowledged that this system worked very well with the colonial missionaries whose main concentration was to prepare people to go to heaven as well as making sure that the bible is used to pacify people and accept their hardships as the will of God without addressing their current problems. It must however be noted also that although some preachers try to give contemporary examples during their sermons, the lectionary still falls short in dealing with contemporary issues. In a country where people are affected by unemployment and some going for several months without being paid their salaries appropriate scriptures and sermons that address and empower the people to create employment for themselves would be of much help to the people. Making inferences is different from having a theme such as Entrepreneurship being preached from the pulpit.

It is also noteworthy that the emphasis on Matthew chapter 28 vs 19 “Go ye therefore and make disciples ...” which gives priority to evangelization relegating other existential issues facing the converted to the periphery is another aspect that shows that there is still need to decolonize the biblical interpretation in the Church. This is the same text that the missionaries used when they came to Africa in the missionary era hence when the Methodist people today talk of their core business they refer to Evangelism, which in the minds of the missionaries was more of civilizing the uncivilized African and nothing else. Ninety percent of the youth interviewed observed that when one talks about issues of entrepreneurship in the Methodist church in Zimbabwe one will be told that that’s not the core business of the church. This observation shows that indeed the colonial missionary ideals of preparing people to go to heaven still influence the theology of the Methodist church even after autonomy. Former Presiding Bishop of the Methodist church Rev F Chirisa in 1991 when the Church celebrated its Centenary lamented that the mission of the church has remained a foreign mission, he postulated that the church has suffered from a spiritual “Kwashiorkor” resulting in a mentality of dependency in matters of faith and practice. He concluded by saying “The Methodist Church in Zimbabwe needs to experience liberation from colonial thinking” (Chirisa, 1991:181). Rev F Chirisa made a critical observation when he mentioned the issue of the mentality of dependency in matters of faith and practice which perpetuates the colonial missionary approach which disempowered the African Christians hence the need to take the issue of decolonization in the church seriously.

3.5. Methodist Church and Sustainable Development

The Methodist Church has continued to excel in partnering the government in the provision of education in Zimbabwe, however it has not done much in empowering the people in light of the high rate of unemployment. Rev F Chirisa referred to unemployment as the new challenge facing the Church and he goes on to say

- Jesus in Luke’s gospel says “He came to proclaim good news to the poor”, the fundamental question is what is good news to an unemployed destitute youth? He summed up by saying as a Church we need to meet the challenge by exploring ways and means of creating employment opportunities for our youths, our Lord came that we may have life and have it in abundance (Chirisa, 1991:185).

This call by Rev Chirisa has remained on paper since no tangible steps have been taken by the church through sermons or otherwise to come to terms with the reality to create employment opportunities. Indeed the Church has continued to pray for those who are not employed to get jobs in a country where many industries have closed instead of coming up with tangible ways to address this challenge. The practice of empowering the ordinary people has always been part of the Methodist tradition from the time of John Wesley when in 1746 in England he set up a simple loan society to assist struggling Methodists which assisted a lot of people including James Lackington who borrowed five pounds to start a second hand bookstore which developed to become the largest second hand bookstore in London (Vermeulen, 2005:173). In 1995 the Methodist church registered with the government of Zimbabwe its service arm called Methodist Relief and Development Agency (Medra) with a mandate to undertake humanitarian and developmental programmes in the communities. Its thematic areas are water and sanitation, sustainable livelihoods and social justice (Medra Pamphlet: 2016). The key objective of this service arm is to work with communities to eliminate poverty and injustice through interventions which bear witness to God’s love (Medra Pamphlet: 2016). It is however interesting to note that this service arm from its objectives and thematic areas perpetuates the colonial mentality of addressing systematic poverty using the same approach that is used by many Non-Governmental Organizations which does not help in promoting permanent economic transformation. It is also noteworthy that this Agency is wholly funded by the Western donor community who dictates what programmes must be pursued and funded. Although the Church should be commended for coming up with a department that looks at developmental issues it is important to note that it has not done much in addressing unemployment and stimulation of entrepreneurship development to the majority of the unemployed urban members of the church.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study noted that the process of the Christianization of the Africa in general and Zimbabwe in particular was tainted by the colonial missionaries' bias towards the agenda of colonialism. Thus the colonial missionaries in many cases used the bible to pacify the Africans as the colonialists exploited the continents resources, they misinterpreted and wrongly used the biblical texts to support colonialism. As noted by Vengei (2009) There must be a departure from the colonial missionary method of reading and interpreting the bible that skirted real issues that African people struggled with, such as land dispossession, economic marginalization, racism among others. According to this study this approach that was used by the missionaries is still prevalent in Africa, therefore there is a need to decolonise the interpretation of the bible to promote entrepreneurship and sustainable development which are key to addressing the problem of poverty in Zimbabwe and Africa.

This study also observed that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe which is one of the former missionary Churches still mirrors the colonial imprints in its theology and interpretation of the bible. Hence it has failed to meaningfully address the real issues poverty and development which the people are struggling with. It is sad to note that the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe being one of the largest congregations in Zimbabwe and has travelled for 39 years after attaining autonomy from the British Methodist, has not yet fully liberated itself from some missionary practices which weakened the role of the church as life giving in the aftermath of the colonial period.

The study noted that entrepreneurship is the window of opportunity towards achieving economic growth and job creation, therefore the Church in general and Methodist church in particular must be seen to play their public role in promoting and stimulating entrepreneurship development in the Zimbabwe and Africa

In view of these conclusions the Methodist Church in Zimbabwe is encouraged to consider the following recommendations as she plays her role in promoting Sustainable development in Zimbabwe.

- The Methodist Church should include entrepreneurial ideals to the proclamation of the gospel not just as an appendage to the Christian faith but by being part of the faith.
- The Methodist Church should also consider aligning its lectionary to include texts and themes that addresses the current struggles being faced by the people.
- The Church must come up with a department of entrepreneurship and sustainable development that should prioritise training in these areas.
- The church should facilitate the setting up of a fund where people including the young people can access interest free loans to start their own businesses and projects.

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