

THE INFLUENCE OF PLATONISM ON PAUL AND HIS MISSIONS TO  
ATHENIANS IN ACTS 17:16-34

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## ABSTRACT

Christian theologians across the continents have presented some agitation to the church on the need to contextualize the gospel, especially in Africa. The basis of their clamour is consequent upon the lack of fit between the Christian gospel, as imported by the western missionaries, and the African life experience. Therefore, an incarnational theology that considers the thought form of the people in any culture is needed. This type of theology must have the potentials to answer the yearnings of the people; hence, Christianity will not be a foreign religion to the African culture.

On this basis, the effort to look critically into one vital area in the Bible where the issue of contextualization is explicitly reflected becomes imperative. Acts 17:16–34 was critically studied. This is about the efforts of Apostle Paul in his missions to proclaim the Good News to the Athenians, most importantly the Epicureans and Stoics in Areopagus. How Paul was able to communicate the gospel to this council is the point that this study examined. The problem is that these audiences of Apostle Paul were philosophers of two different schools of thought but they had readiness to listen to new ideas in common.

Apostle Paul, who was not only familiar with their ways of life, but had also been brought up in the culture of Platonism, which had become the general culture of the Mediterranean World before this time, and which was also the foundation to these two brands of philosophies, had to present the Gospel using the platonic method—Dialogue. This method is comparable to seminar approach today. Consequently, some of these people were saved.

The study is a library research. Positions of various scholars and theologians were considered and reviewed. Moreover, some approaches of Jesus Christ, in His earthly ministry, in presenting the Gospel of the kingdom to some of His many

audiences were equally studied. These were made the parameters to review the elements of Platonism in the theology and strategy of Paul as presented in his message.

## 5.2. CONCLUSIONS

The power of the gospel in saving men and women from sin and its consequences cannot be undermined. This is the reason Apostle Paul said that he was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ Jesus, for it is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). However, how this gospel, as powerful as it is, is presented determines its efficacy and impact in saving souls. In the same vein, the impact of the same gospel in the life of the Christian preacher determines the functionality of the same gospel in the lives of the pagans. On the other hand, the personality of the Christian preacher; his or her dispositions to life and ministry, also informs how the gospel is to be preached. However, these dispositions are the product of his or her

background in life which could include his or her worldview, philosophy of life, environment and culture.

As a result of all these, this study examined the influence the philosophy named after Plato, called Platonism, had on Apostle Paul and his ministry, especially his missions to the Ecuperean and Stoic philosophers at Areopagus in Athens in the book of Acts of the Apostles chapter seventeen, verses sixteen to thirty-four. The major outcome of the study is that Apostle Paul had a successful ministry to his audience at this place and that the secret of this success was his similar dispositions to life (with these people) before his conversion experience. These dispositions were informed by his orientation in the popular philosophy of his time which had become an essential part of the entire Graeco - Roman culture.

Therefore, Paul spoke to these philosophers about the gospel of Christ Jesus following the philosophical pattern of dialogue which they understood very well. The success of his presentation is also seen in the area of securing the audience of these people in the first place to the extent that he was allowed to present all the essentials of Christian faith. Moreso, this success can still be seen in the caliber of some of these people that accepted his message and gave their lives to Jesus Christ.

In this sense, Paul's pattern of presenting the gospel to these people remains a relevant one and a model to follow when it comes to preaching the gospel to pagans whose philosophies of life are similar to those ones at Areopagus. It has to be studied and it has to be used by adaptation.

### 5.3. RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study will not be brought into the limelight if it has no bearing on the contemporary issues that deal with missions and evangelism. Therefore, some recommendations are hereby presented.

The inclusion of the various philosophical programmes in the Theological Seminaries, Colleges of Theology, and Pastor Schools is justifiable and should be subjected to periodic review for more relevance. The various philosophical positions in the world today are direct antithesis to Christian teachings of the Bible. As a result of this, every Christian worker needs to be well informed about these positions with a view to learning how to adapt the gospel message to any of them for better understanding. It is necessary to review the curricula of these various institutions in order to plan, redesign and adjust the contents so as to keep pace with these philosophical challenges which endanger the souls of people by their strongholds.

Again, contextualization of Christian faith and practices is very imperative at this time. The contemporary Christian theologians have been agitating and clamouring for this for a number of reasons. When considering cultural differences from one culture to the other, making the Christian faith relevant to the new culture becomes a major challenge which must be addressed. How this is done determines the thriving and functionality of Christianity to the spiritual, physical, psychological, cultural, economic and political needs of the people within the culture. Therefore, the new culture must be studied adequately so that the gospel of Christ Jesus could be appropriately adapted without any form of distortion. The problem of language is a major aspect in contextualizing Christian faith. The original languages of the Bible are Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. For the Bible to be meaningful to the people of another tongue, culture and worldview, therefore, the Bible should be translated in the languages of the new cultures directly from the original languages in relation to its philosophy and worldview.

Moreover, faith and reason are two different languages that are miles apart. Therefore, every Christian worker, especially the cross - cultural missionaries, should bear in mind that reasoning can be employed, in form of dialogue, with adherents of

other philosophical ideology as a means but not an end itself. It is, however, fundamental for such a Christian to be sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit for wisdom in presenting the gospel message. The strengths of such ideology could be appraised but their weaknesses should be modified and corrected by the instrumentality of the Holy Spirit and God's word. In doing this, Paul's strategy is the basic approach and could be highly instrumental to presenting the gospel in cross-cultural missions even in the contemporary time. In this regard, it is recommended that every cross - cultural missionary should go to learn the language of the new culture, to be familiar with the culture and philosophical ideology of the new land in focus. It is also beneficial to the Christian worker to familiarize him or herself with the people of this culture so as to translate the language of learning into the realities of life.

In the same way, Christian backgrounds should be a tool or means in communicating the gospel to people of the same backgrounds. The personality of a man is shaped by many factors such as his family background, educational background, environmental and vocational backgrounds. Therefore, all these factors are tools in the hand of God as background experiences that could be employed to present the love of God, in the best way possible, to the people that have the same or similar experiences in life. However, Christian networking is recommended in cases where the situation does not hold. A well matured Christian worker who has a very similar orientation with such an unbeliever or a pagan community should be sought for, for maximum results.

The effectiveness of the above recommendation depends on a Bible-based discipleship programme. This is a necessary instrument to nurture every gospel worker for better adaptability of Christian faith and practices. Christianity is not all about profession of faith but bearing fruit that abide for Jesus. Since almost all other

philosophical positions are direct opposite to Christian faith and practices, therefore, those who claim to be children of light should be taught, groomed and disciplined so that they can be true to their profession in life and ministry. It is this character difference that the pagans will see that will give witness about Jesus, the Christ.

Sensitivity to the environment where the gospel worker finds him or herself is of paramount importance. This is both physical and spiritual. Physical sensitivity, on the one hand, enables the missionary (Christians in general) to be able to function in translating the gospel to the language of love. It enables him or her to respond to the deep needs of his or her society. Thereby, the gospel is not limited and not ridiculed. On the other hand, spiritual sensitivity affords the Christian to be kept abreast with the spiritual needs of the people. This need might have a chain of reactions to the extent of manifesting physically. In this sense, spiritual sensitivity becomes necessary as it determines both physical and spiritual states of the being of the people. Spiritual sensitivity may, however, involve or result into spiritual warfare prayers as several environments are under the direct influence of demonic forces of darkness. In this situation, it is prayer alone that can loose people from these strongholds of Satan. Therefore, the gospel worker should be prayerful and sensitive at all times so that the gospel could be profitable both physically and spiritually in the environment where the missionary finds him or herself.

Apart from being sensitive to one's environment, a missionary should study his or her environment very well even before taking any step further vis-à-vis presentation of the gospel. Apostle Paul did this so well until a burden is formed upon his mind so much that he could not afford to be silent any longer. When the missionary is sensitized of strange things that endanger the lives of the people in such an environment, a step should be taken further to study it. This will enable him or her to ascertain the extent of the problem. Moreso, it will allow the missionary to be able

to strategize well and make adequate plans of actions through the instrumentality of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, theological training to any possible level is required and highly recommended for any would be missionary. Basic Christian experiences are good as they serve as the basis for one's life and ministry. However, without a formal theological training, such a worker is bound to be limited in every area of his or her ministerial assignments and calling. It is through this training systematized form of instructions that are capable of transforming lives and restructure one's focus in life and ministry is obtained. Theological training is likened to a builder who builds and configures a life to a specific taste capable of meeting or doing a specific assignment. Therefore, this training is necessary and recommendable to broaden the worldview and scope of the gospel workers.