

The Heritage of Contextual Management of Cultural Differences: A Reflection of ACTS 15

By Daniel Mdobi Kiula

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Abstract

This article submits its focus on biblical backgrounds relative to the study in question. Grubbs (Counseling seminar facilitator, 1998) contends, "You can change biblically" Suggestively, this is what should be perceived in the contemporary church in Africa today. Special attention is also directed to the role and responsibility of readers of the article in order to critically study, understand Acts 15, and apply it in resolving community's intergroup emerging cultural challenges.

I. Introduction

Diversity is a rich value. Unfortunately, its appreciation continues to grow less day by day. From the word go, God had intended diversity to add the beauty of His creation. We see around us mountains, rivers, ocean, trees, animals, human being, etc. All creation definitely is not uniform. God affirmed His creation as He commented, "It is good" and so is Grubb's (1998) comment;

Man's search for ways to explain and to "cope" with his problems has produced many interesting and often conflicting theories. All of these theories are predictably contrary to God's word, since they have been devised by man operating outside the divine revelation of God.

Unless man follows God's way never will he be able to do what he does properly. Problems, for instance, have been excessively entertained in many church set up. People seem to be failing to learn to harmoniously stay together with fellows who are not of the same culture. Issues like tribalism, nepotism, and favoritism are evidences of the fact in some of the present African countries. This article for that matter is set to urge for a critical learning of biblical principles embedded in Acts 15 as an approach to manage cultural differences.

II. The Inside of the Passage

The initial understanding of Acts 15 I believe may be enhanced by breaking it into subtopics. The passage is an account of cultural related events. It is the failure of the people of Saint Paul's time to appreciate and the approach taken by the disciples that the passage dictates to us today what to do and what not to do in abhorring cultural differences. The setting indicates how the contents are related. The characters' class, tribes and gender reflect diversified practices, either sacred, or secular that are the key aspects of consideration.

a) The Historical Background

The Antioch Church had been noticed to be fast, actively growing, and a witnessing Church. Being a preaching center at the base of Syria the population had also tremendously grown from monoculture to multicultural environment. Controversies, however, rose following cultural biases. On the one hand, Judaizers claimed that Gentiles must undergo circumcision, a condition thought to be the prerequisite toward accessing salvation. Circumcision was to the Judaizers and Pharisaic followers a sign for their membership (Cook, 1992).

On the other hand, issues amounted to hazardous level. As a result, Barnabas and Paul were sent back to the headquarters so that they would find out from the Council concerning the whole issue of cultural snags. Members of the Church who associated themselves with the pharisaic party still insisted that Gentile believers should be instructed to submit to circumcision, an event that further propelled spiritual stigma.

With an accompaniment of Peter and James, Barnabas and Paul addressed the council. James summarized all what Barnabas and Paul had suggested that Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised to be saved (Cook, 1992) but needed to only respect certain Jewish customs and standards (Stagg, 1955). Finally, the passage addresses Paul and Barnabas amicably parting company. Barnabas took John Mark and headed to Cyprus while Paul and Silas set for their second missionary journey.

b) Significances of the Setting

The composition of the setting of the passage, characters, events, values and beliefs, cultures, controversies, concepts, ideas etc. gives the respondents an opportunity to gather some significances as follows;

- **The Significance Related to The Mission of Christ**

When Jesus once said, "I will build my Church..." (Mat. 16:18) I believe he did not mean to single out any cultural group. Cultural indifference, indeed, does not congruently measure up with the great commission of Jesus to either his disciples or to the Christian Church today. The Church that Jesus referred to was a universal Church that not one cultural group is only entitled to it. It was the Church of all nations, tribes, kingdoms, and races that His disciples would later go to.

The setting therefore presents us with the purpose of the mission of Christ and the results of doing the ministry contrary to the absolute purpose. The conversion of Cornelius, other people of Antioch, Cyprus, Pisidia, Pamphilia, Lycaonia and cultural backgrounds of different characters, are a significant proof that the Church is and should be far much beyond cultural boundaries.

- **The Significance in Relation to Teamwork**

The setting definitely gives us the picture of the need for the leaders of different background in their cultures, skills and talents to work creatively and collaboratively. As McDonald (retrieved on 17/12/2014) puts it, "collaborative culture is the space to explore ideas of participatory arts, community development, and cultural policy through

actual projects on a local level and national and international research” The setting in the like manner shows how the team understood the problem, how they took initiatives to develop relationships and their willingness to help. In all that, the team endeavored and totally depended upon the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is the Jesus way for “Leadership is primarily about two things- results and relationships. It is how we influence others to accomplish a specific mission, vision, and goal, whether grand and glorious or humble and mundane” (Blanchard and Hodges, 2005).

- **The Significance in Relation to Confronting the Problem Against Attacking People**

The ceremonial law of Moses, the tradition of the elders and rabbinical addictions, the moral law which though of perpetual and universal obligation as a law of life was and is an observance of salvation point to the root cause of controversy (Marshal, 1958). Following this controversy it so happened that the Church became suspicious whether all spelled conditions had any good reason for their Christianity that which later necessitated the sending of Barnabas and Paul for more inquiries in Jerusalem. Similar to this scenario, the problem still persists today. It is thus mandatory to find good biblical principles that would help curbing the problem.

- **The Significance in Relation to the Contrast Between the Old Testament Law and the New Testament Law**

Acts 15 straightly points out the transformation of the Old Testament law into the New Testament law. It is no longer the law of Moses, but the grace and love of God that man need in order to be saved. “The decision of the Holy Spirit and through James was that Christians will not be bound by the Old Testament Law (Barnhouse, 1979). “The unity of the church is indeed presupposed. There is no thought of one set of rules for the Jews and another for the Gentiles. All believers are viewed as one household with no differences” (Tourville, 1983). Acts 15 is the “Continental divide” of the New Testament. The events recorded here have affected the flow of Church history ever since. This chapter tells how God moved the church from the dangers of legalism to spiritual freedom – from rules for the flesh to transformation of the heart” These descriptions, to me seem to be the support of the fact that gaining God’s perspective on any difficulty is important for those involved in solving problems biblically.

- **The Significance in Relation to how God Works**

The Bible clearly points out the uniqueness of God in doing things. It is one thing to read Romans 8:28-29 and quite another thing to accept it. In the setting, it can be viewed that the controversy opened a way for the true teaching to be taught to the quorum of the council including other Church members in Jerusalem. Following Barnabas parting company with Paul, Stagg (1955:164) comments, “There was some salvage value from the painful separation; two mission parties were formed, and Paul doubtless found greater freedom in the Gentile mission” These same incidences may still happen to our present communities. The challenge here is how we sometimes need to look at problems as open windows to success.

- **The Significance in Relation to Ethnicity, Class or Gender of the Characters**

Different ethnic, different class and different gender of the characters have important lessons to learn as herein stipulated;

i) In Missions:

My assumption points to the situation of the possibility of communicating the gospel to be easier and effective if at all ethnic, class, and gender differences are to be appreciated. Indeed, they can serve as special tool to facilitate the process of any action. Mission implies a communication of the gospel to those of another culture and language. It involves believers in many countries around the world to allow the variety of skills and professions to contribute and collectively to the spiritual warfare of the people among whom they work (Hulbert, 1975).

ii) In the Social Structure:

The idea I tend to communicate here is that of identity and good relationship among members of different cultural background. Most often in Africa for instance, a person is identified based on lines of ethnic group, the class and the tribe. Winter (1992) observes three kinds of societies – tribal societies, peasant, and urban individualistic societies. The question, “What are you?” according to Winter, is repeatedly asked...because people want to know how they can relate to the new comer” The character who easily identifies himself with another group in this area, then, can easily be accepted.

iii) Diversity and Unity Against Uniformity

Today, complications in surface culture can easily be observed whenever major transition occurs as has been experienced during the interface between the gospel and local cultures and most likely between Western culture and local cultures (Kapolyo, 2007). However, different ethnic groups, class or gender of characters as reflected in Acts 15 is an indication that the Antioch Church was composed of a diversified yet unified cultural presentation. Also, the team that was involved in the problem solving was undoubtedly a composition of members from different cultural background for instance; Barnabas was a Hebrew, Paul - a Roman citizen, Peter - a Galilean, James - a step brother of Jesus and Silas who was a Roman.

Hulbert (1975) further stipulates and makes an idea helpful on how to look at the whole issue of diversity and at the same time maintain unity among team or societal members in the Church;

The Church is both the goal and the means of evangelizing and discipling. Because He is building His Church in a world of cultural compartments, each with its limitations and potentials, it is essential that the gospel be demonstrated and communicated in a way each can understand. Because Jesus had delegated this undertaking to the church, He has equipped each member of the body, in whatever cultural surroundings, with ability to contribute.

The diversity and unity as portrayed in the setting, I personally believe, by and by largely allows the exercise of different gifts and skills that different characters have, and

this to me, looks to be a significant implementation that any institution should not afford to ignore.

c) Some Identified Sacred Events in the Passage

As earlier noted in the passage, the problem in question has been whether the Gentiles really needed to conform to Jews customs to be saved. Reconciliation, as opposed to compromise seems to me the primacy of the passage. The General Secretary of the World Association for Christians Communication once pointed out; "Reconciliation is a central theme of almost all religions....When the Apostle Paul refers in his letters to reconciliation, his main idea is precisely that God is the subject of reconciliation" It can therefore, affirmatively be ascertained that reconciliation is a biblical mandate that Christians should observe whenever a problems crops up. This being an implication from the passage, however, the obvious are the practices that to do them would mean defiling their Christian living. The practices were pollution of idols which means eating things (meat included) offered to idols, fornication, that is sexual immorality, things strangled, and finally, blood which was also prohibited.

d) The Outcomes of the Ordeal

James and the Jewish Council repeatedly spoke in terms of the burden placed upon the Gentiles believers (Carson, 1994). This burden eventually was removed. Reconciliation was achieved. The letter was written including the decision that was reached. The Church in Jerusalem did not back up the teaching brought up by men about the circumcision of the Gentiles. The Ministry of Paul, Barnabas, Peter, and James was confirmed. The Holy Spirit of God was given room to intervene the situation than just pointing to a political maneuver. Cultural differences so to speak, were managed. "Believers in Antioch regained their composure. They were glad and rejoiced as Judas and Silas remained with them for a while" (Cook, 1992).

Additionally, two other mission parties were formed as a result of Paul and Barnabas parting company. Barnabas and John Mark decided to go to Cyprus while Paul and Silas took the initiative to go Galatia. Timothy later joined Paul and Silas in Lystra. Based on the above observations, it can be concluded that the outcomes are significantly important to the contemporary Church and society as we observe from the setting;

1. That characters were culturally different
2. That culture may affect critical thinking if ambitiously considered
3. There is no cultural absolute but any culture is subject to change and valued differently
4. Cultural activists can adjust their behavioral style in different cultural settings but not necessarily conform to it
5. Cultural differences may be God's way of acting
6. There are moments our problems and weaknesses can be used as window opportunities to success
7. Society members can creatively and collaboratively work as a team regardless of their cultural differences
8. There are some things that cannot happen until when there is a problem

9. It is possible to manage cultural differences biblically

Characters should know that the real test of salvation has nothing to do with our cultural beliefs, values and differences but rather, it is the condition of our hearts. God accepts people of all cultures by giving them the same Holy Spirit. God did not distinguish the circumcised and the non-circumcised. God does not lower Himself and His standards (Cook, 1992). This is to say that the biblical culture is above all other cultures.

e) Biblical Position for Understanding Cultural Competence

It is worth noting that there is no cultural absolute. Since God's work do not happen in a culture-vacuum space, He has given us a diversity of cultures so that we may learn to acknowledge, respect, and appreciate other people's potentialities and work together as a team.

God is universal and does not favor any side in the expense of the other party. Thus, regardless of all differences, God looks at us as equals. Before him, there is neither black nor white. There is neither class nor tribe that has higher cultural qualification for God's favor. We as the Church of Christ have got to know that working cross-culturally does not mean imposition of cultural values over another people group. We can best use our biblically accepted cultures and help contextualize the learning without compromise.

At all costs, culture should not be thought of as an obstacle of doing the ministry cross-culturally. The Church, I believe, will do better to acknowledge the fact that culture provides competitiveness. Contextualization, as noted earlier, does not necessarily mean compromising. Communicating the gospel should be processed in the way through which people are able to understand the truth and culturally significant in their cultural boundaries.

III. Practical Applications

Humanism thrives on attacking other worldly and superstitious elements in traditional religion and culture. Against them it calls for the affirmation of present human values and the application of critical reason to the solution of human problems. But it has no new basis or ground for its affirmation of humanity. It derives its vision of the sacredness of human personality from the traditional Christianity it rejects (Cobb, 1995). This understanding affords us to see several dimensions of applying the passage.

A. Contemporary Issues

We are presently living in a world of confrontations that call for reconciliation (Valle, 1999). Culture seems to have caught many people's attention defining it as "...concerned with beliefs and values on the basis of which people interpret experiences and behave, individually and in groups" (Kotelnikov & Bibikova, accessed on 19/12/2014). In the same view point, the setting of Acts 15 points out clear situation which happens today in the world of modern technology, economic issues, matters of religions, and diversified cultural traditions.

Kennedy (1975) affirmatively reiterates contemporary Church oriented challenge of racism as one among social problems that need practical address. He remarks, "To our shame, Christian Churches around the world avert the covert" He goes forth observing specific indicators;

- 1) Some congregations are organized along racial lines
- 2) Some congregations easily reject those who are different
- 3) Some Churches struggle against racism abroad, but refuse to face it at home
- 4) Some Churches contribute to psychological conditioning of the racially oppressed
- 5) Some Churches show signs of elitism and self-pretensions
- 6) Some Churches discriminate in assisting leadership privileges and program priorities.

The above six observations parallels the problem cited in Acts 15. The chapter feels so fresh to today's world cultural indifferences. In East Africa, notably Kenya and Uganda, tribal loyalties and the evidence is not difficult to seek....Today, however, tribal loyalty may mean a quick promotion from being a sergeant to captain, clerk to manager within a very short space of time (Okullu, no date). Africa has been a continent where poor cultural difference appreciation has taken root. Tribal wars and mass killings within regions have indicatively been critically alarming. There is hate and lack of concern for one another. We need people who know how to go beyond various barriers that exist, link the hands of those who call upon the name of Jesus Christ in truth and bring them into corporation to the Lord's work (Mensah, 1991).

B. Theology of Humanity

The passage portrays the relationship between God and man. Man is created by God. God created men with differences in culture, skills and ability. Every human has some strengths and limitations. In view of Peter's address to the Council, if men are to live and do the will of God then they need the power of God through the Holy Spirit. Men, therefore, have to appreciate what God has culturally entrusted to them as opposed to the Jews attitude toward the Gentile believers. It is not the question of one's weakness or strength but the issue in point is one's understanding and acting upon those strengths and weaknesses. Regardless the God-given differences the need for each other cannot be underestimated. Carson (1994) strongly comments and it is worth noting that;

For modern readers the riddle of James is not only why some things are included but also why other important ethical imperatives are omitted. For surely Gentiles believers would have been expected not to steal, for example. It is perceived typical Gentile behavior that explains the contents of the list – all believers should act more like servants of the true God than like ordinary Gentiles of the day.

In view of the above comment, it can be deduced that theology of humanity is real. Its application is what makes a difference in the church today. It is worth remembering that human existence is always socio-political. Every life and every message in a society influences that society. By our lives and our words we criticize the society of which we are a part, and if our lives are not a criticism, they implicitly support it (Toren, 2007). The contemporary church is called upon to adapt to changing needs within the changing

Christian community. In this regard education of, and potential leaders is a prime concern. Their training must include an ability to respond creatively in an ever-changing world. It will also mean a more integrated and wholistic approach to personal development and to human life (Doohn in Hawkins, 1998).

C. Relating the Principles to Occupational Arena

I personally believe in the “diversity of culture” and challenged by the fact that the Bible commands me to love and respect other people irrespective of their varied cultural background. I see that there is more strength in inter-cultural relations. If anything should strongly be emphasized then, is the need for the Church to embark on transformational movement from culture-independence and culture dependence to cultural interdependence. It pays more to think proactively based on the following principles according to Hulbert (1975) that;

- The Church is both the goal and the means of evangelizing and discipling
- God is building his church in a world of cultural compartments
- Each cultural compartments have limitations and potentials
- It is essential that the gospel be demonstrated and communicated in ways each can understand
- God has equipped each member with ability to contribute

The instance in Acts 15 is informatory, educative, and transformative. It leaves no room for “culture bias” It is an encouragement that all Church leaders need to abhor the fact that the Bible does not look down upon people’s culture wholesomely. It should actively be declared that culture is subject to change and that man’s culture is more relative than it is absolute because it can be changed, amplified, or diminished. As global ministries plunges through waves of opposition...the course remains the same but periodic changes of direction are required. The same Holy Spirit...is guiding church and mission leaders to face new challenges (Hulbert, 1975).

IV. Summary and Recommendations

Cultural difference is an aspect. It is globally acknowledged and locally acted. This is an age of globalization...not a mere socio-economic phenomenon; rather it is a realization that our world is a shrinking global village. Our world grows smaller with technology and as it does our knowledge of each other’s way of life increases (Anono, 2003). There is often a harmonized community life whenever there is communication, and acceptance of differences in cultural backgrounds. It is not an issue of whether it is right or wrong to be born in a certain culture. Cultures that do not contradict the Bible are from God, and thus God purposefully uses them differently.

The passage in Acts 15 is the description about cultural differences and their significances. God designed different people with different cultures, values and beliefs. However, the key question is, “Did Gentiles need to abhor Jews culture to be saved?” The Church, I believe, is called to unity and fellowship and not to cultural uniformity and conformity. For any society, authentic development means providing optimal life-sustenance, esteem, and freedom to all its members...in four domains; economic,

political, social, and cultural (Goulet, 1997). To be able to do this, a standard measure, the Bible is needful.

Church leaders are obligated to acknowledge and accept cultural differences, demonstrate, and work together as one team regardless of existing cultural limitations. I also encourage leaders to teach their congregations to read the Bible with open-minded observing applied principles above their cultural realms. Legalism, rationalism, tribalism or racial biasness, are as bad as any other sins.

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