Early Church and Development of Christian Theology: African Church Leaders' Contribution as Pathfinders, AD 100-600

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Abstract

The church started by Jesus Christ in the First Century, after his death was a strong movement that revolutionized world religious structure and formation. The Jews monotheistic belief system was strengthened and driven to accommodate transcendent union that brought the "sacred" close to the "profane", thereby bridging the long time gap that existed in the relationship between both spheres. This new awareness gave the church of Jesus Christ, the impetus to make an inward-push that conquered the world for Christ. But the success became a bane to the church unity, how could it explain the union in the God-head to the world full of critical minds? Who is supreme among the three personalities in the truism? However, thanks to the early Christian scholars who rose to give answer to inquiring minds. The answers they provided became the foundation Christian theology needed, which also blossomed to a systematic theology that the contemporary church is proud of. This paper gives valuable sketches of the three prominent Christian scholars views on certain issues within the first five centuries of Christian church history, that enriched Christian faith. They are: Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine- their understanding of trinity, Person of Christ, man in sin and grace respectively gave the church strength to dig more revelation of God's purpose for the world. The important fact in this work is that they were Africans and pathfinders. Narrative and investigative approaches are used to underline their important roles in the development of Christian theology. The paper encourages Africans to study these men and other leaders in the faith to strengthen their own determination to serve the Lord, Jesus Christ.

Keywords; Early Church, Christian Theology, the Pathfinders, Jesus Christ

Introduction

In recent times, African cities and towns have experienced an explosion of Pentecostal fervour as more and more "men of God" invest in the business of saving souls. At the very heart of the encounter between Christianity and African culture is the subject of Christology (Christ and the Christian faith). It is traditionally defined as the doctrine of the person of Christ. The Christian Kergma is the proclamation of the good news of how God through Jesus Christ of Nazareth acts to bridge the gulf between God and man, a gulf existing as a consequence of man's sin and the imperative deriving therefrom.

The influence of Africa on Christianity is profound and often overlooked. To understand this, we need to delve into the early history when Christianity was born in the eastern Mediterranean region, in what is today Israel and Palestine. From there, it spread rapidly across the Roman Empire, reaching Africa early in first century. North Africa, in particular, was a significant center for Christian scholarship, and influential thinkers like Origen of Alexander and Athanasius lived and wrote books there (Johnson 2025). Tertullian and Augustine were also early church leaders who contributed to make some North Africa cities great centers of Christian learning. When the church has doctrinal issues on Tri-personal God, Atonement (salvation and faith) and man's relation to God. It was these men of great centers in Africa, that provided guidelines for church stability. Each of the doctrine formulated from their teaching was stone-laid as foundation upon pillars were added till the whole edifice was erected, (Finlayson 1969).

The doctrine formulated became associated with these great men of God. Each has one linked to him. Tertullian has the doctrine of the Trinity associated with him, Athanasius was seen as the proponent of the doctrine of the person of Christ while Augustine was given the credit of teacher of man in sin and grace. Though they did not give us the final truth of each doctrine, every subsequent generation built on what has been layed. Even each foundation layer took the labour of his predecessor in the field (1969:9), to grow his point. The actions of these great men became a pattern in the church history, that when an issue comes up that pertains the growth and strength of the church in any generation, God would raise a wise mind to articulate the faith of the church to solve or withstand the threat. In the medieval, someone as Anslem gave the church the doctrine of atonement, while at the Reformation era came Luther and Calvin; each took the issues of justification by faith and church authority respectively. Even in the contemporary church where liberalism and rationalism had sway, the like of Barth preached against vanity and vague in modernism. He emphasized that liberal theology has not given man peace and hope, rather, domesticated God into being the patron saint of human institutions and values (Arrie 1969:290.

A narrative pattern with an underlining sociological explanation was applied to give the paper an existential principle that illuminates the relevance of the issues in the context of contemporary church. Tertullian experience as the first to conceptualize trinity was explained, Athanasius fight with the Arianists looked at and the Augustine teaching on man, sin and grace mirrored in the light of God's plan for the world. A conclusion was given to encourage African church leaders to persevere God's work.

Early Church

Early connotes before the usual or expected time. If an activity is to start at a given time, an early attendance means that someone should come before the actual time. Early then means before or near the beginning. It could also stand for the first. Early church could mean the first group of people who formed the church. Describing church in one of his previous writings, Johnson (2015) said "the assemblage of God's people" that is "a radical new generation of people who accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and son of God (1). Church is a fellowship of people who believe in Jesus Christ and accept his divinity and salvation act. Early church will be referring to the first set of believers, who saw and heard Jesus preached, those who succeeded apostles and those who defended what they knew was handed over to them. The church as an institution as we have today, has passed through many stages: identification,

persecutions, fighting internal wrangling, formation of formularies that sustain it till this contemporary times. Therefore, the early church includes the formation period, persecution time and the heresies ravaged era. Historically, this period ranges from Pentecost time AD 33 to 500. Some may argue AD 44 when St Paul started his missionary writings to 325 when the church formulated the Nicene Creed. The first five centuries after the death of Jesus Christ is seen as early church history.

The Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt traces its roots to St. Mark, who is believed to have brought Christianity to Egypt in the first century. The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church also has ancient origins, dating back to the fourth century. It is worth noting that Ethiopia is the only African nation to have never been colonized, and its Christian tradition is deeply rooted in its cultural identity. Moreover, Africa play a crucial role in the early church councils, which helped shape Christian Doctrine. The council of Nicaea in 325 A.D, for example, was attended by bishops from across the Roman Empire, including Africa.

It is also important to recognize that the African Christian tradition has been distinct from its European counterpart. Christianity in Africa often incorporates indigenous cultural practices and beliefs. This can be seen in the vibrant liturgical music and dance of African churches or the practice of ancestoral veneration, which some African Christians see as compatible with their faith. The spread of Christianity in Africa was not solely the result of European missionaries. In fact, long before European colonization, African Christians were evangelizing their own communities. The expansion of Christianity in Africa is a complex and multifaceted story, influenced by indigenous traditions, African Christian leaders and European missionaries.

Overall, the history of Christianity in Africa is a testament to the diversity and adaptability of the Christian faith. It shows how a religion that originated in the Middle East was able to take root and flourished in Africa, contributing to the rich tapestry of global Christianity.

Tertullian Experience on Trinity

Tertullian was a privileged person to defend Christianity against Pegan world of Rome Empire. His father was a Roman "Aide de-comp" (Centurien proconsularis), an Army Officer (Johnson 2015). He was educated in Greek, Philosophy and Latin. He probably studied in Rome and later relocated to Alexandria. He had Roman law knowledge, though not so vast, he used it to the advantage of the church, who he defended against the attackers of the Christian faith. He was one of the Latin Apologists who gave a formidable opposition to the heresies of the early church. Having the view point of Alexandria theology and philosophical understanding of "matter" and "spirit", held that the "union" of God and Son is one nature and it is divine. The Father, His son has this one nature in common. They are separate and distinct, however, so far as their persons are concerned (Boer 1976:113). The problem of this nature is solved by the union of the father and son. God-nature and man-nature joined together made God-man who had divine humanity (Foster 1972).

The Holy Spirit was not a topical issue then but its position in the God-head gives the idea of Trinity. Tertullian argued that the three persons have one divine nature but distinct role. The nature is not separated, they are one God, one substance. It is Tertullian who first used the words "persons" substance and "Trinity" as regard to the argument of Godhead. These words

become important to orthodox scholars in the council of Nicaea and Constantinople AD 325 and 351 respectively. It should be noted that some persons have given earlier insight to the trinity but never in the form that Tertullian put it. "Triad in God was expressed by Theophilus (AD186) and Athenagore (AD 178), said about three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the worship.

Athanasius Fight with Arians (301-373)

Athanasius was a strong follower with influential personality that affected people around him. This he acquired through his association with important figures in the early church, such as Pachomius, Anthony Athanasius delved into inter-church politics by holding some important positions in the church. He was a secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria and later became the bishop in 328. He suffered several displacements as bishop and also was restored many times. His dislike of the Arians and their teaching put him in frontline of fire whenever a new bishop of Arians was in control or new successor of emperor was in favour of Arianism. However, he managed to survive and hit the Arianists final blow that nailed their teaching to historical oblivion in Ecclesiastical cycle.

Athanasius in his teaching, stressed that the logos "God the word by his union in mankind, restored the fallen man the image of God and by his death and resurrection met and overcame death (Livingstone 1977:38). He wrote many articles in defense of the divinity of the Son, using his position to pass forward his ideas. At the Nicaea council, he was able to rally round others to accept the Nicene creed, which he helped to formulate. Even when the emperor, with the advice of the Arians removed the Contentious Homoiousius (same nature) from the creed and deposed Athanasius as Bishop of Alexandra, he worked with Eusebius (the great power broker in the politics of the empire) to coin the word "Homoi" which means "like" and these combinations give Homoiousius – "like nature" (Johnson 2015). This was acceptable than total rejection of the "same nature". He upheld the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the full manhood of Christ and refused "Apollionarian tendencies (which deny the full humanity of the son). It was by the activities of Athanasius that Arianism was laid to rest in Chalcedon Council 541 where the church faith stated that the Lord Jesus was complete as to His Godhead and complete as to His manhood (Finlayson 1969).

Augustine's Teaching on Man, Sin and Grace

Augustine of Hippo takes his turn among Africans that contributed immensely to the development of Christology and in general Christianity. Augustine was the dominant figure in the history of Christianity between the close of the New Testament canon and Reformation. He was born in Tegaste near the city of Hippo, North Africa in 383A.D, he crossed the sea to Rome with his mistress and son and his mother, who joined him (Boer 1976). Augustine was baptized in 386 A.D and was ordained as a priest in 389 A.D and returned to North Africa in 395 A.D as assistant Bishop of Hippo. In 410A.D, after fall of Rome, he began his writing of – The City of God. He died during the Vandals' siege of Hippo Regius in 430 A.D (Woodbridge 1988). Augustine, Roman Catholics during the period (1225-1274), he is rivalled only by that os Thomas Aquinas. Augustine is the only slightly less important in the history of philosophers between Plotinus (third century) and Aquinas. He was the last major thinker of the ancient world and the first philosopher and theologian of the Middle Ages. His work is still a model for those Christian thinkers who would use Platonism as a framework for their Christian world and life view. Among the area of Christian thought, Augustine's ideas are

still much studied, like the relationship between faith and reason, the problem of evil, divine grace and predestination, the doctrine of the Trinity and the philosophy of history.

Augustine's teaching on man and grace gave the church an understanding of God's plan for the universe. Man is created in God's image; this means that man's soul has special relation to God. Even on the father nature of man, he was never meant to be apart from God. Man could only achieve his destiny through dependent on the grace of God. God is always ready to impart himself on man. It is when this relationship is understood and maintained that man has true freedom, not necessarily from sin, but ability not to sin and then has potential to claim righteousness and this leads to immortality.

Augustine saw man as someone under probation which means he could sin. Adam was a good example; he sinned and fell apart from God. The sin was on the basis of moral and ethics and that nature of man is to sin, so sin cuts him from off the source of being and sustenance in God. Man could not bring himself to the level of being dominant over evil. Sin then is a subtraction that deny man from essence. A tree is left to decay once it is cut off from its root. Transmission of sin is therefore transmitted from a man, Adam to all. However, Augustine was not too sure of this mysterious unity of sin, because he sometimes believed that Adam's sin is hereditary; yet he often said that Adam dragged all the human race with him as the head.

The damage done to man's nature by sin is associated with man's Will. God gave him free Will to act but he chose to sin. This Will is a faculty responsive to inclinations and behests of the nature. Man wears it as a weather cook; which he is willing to hire in any direction the wind blows. It is man's Will to act the way he wants. When man fell, this Will has been diseased and perverted. This entails that the will of man is enslaved by the evil nature; a corrupt nature makes corrupt use of its Will (Finlayson 1969:31).

With this in man, Augustine found out that the solution to man's depravity is God's love and grace. His love is not so that he does good, a parent would wish for his child or children through discipline, but that God loves man. God's love is free, it is not restricted but to all mankind and anyone (Watson 1969 148). To Augustine, God choosing Israel was a peculiar people is not because of favouritism, rather for salvation of the world. This act of God is pure grace though the Israelites repaid Him with ingratitude and disobedience. God's love is liberal and finds expression in judgement and chastisement which are shown in mercy and deliverance. Augustine's application of Grace of God to man's salvation gave the later reformers and evangelicals the impetus to proclaim that salvation is not assisted by sacerdotal rather free direct access to God, without the aid of any means. Augustine's teaching on sin and grace is a very big gift to the church and the world as whole.

Conclusion

Africans through scholarship have a unique and enterprising activities in developing and expanding their awareness of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in the world. The forefathers of African Christianity stood out in this regard; contributing to the development of Christianity. The revival of Christianity in recent time is as a result of African leaders' innovation. The history of Christianity cannot be completed without mentioning the contributions made by African descents. The contributions of Tertullian of Carthage, who was

practically from Tunisia in Africa and his colleagues such as Origen of Alexandra and Cyrians of Carthage and the others which include Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandra whose work on Christology was the basis of Constantinople Council (381) decision on the nature of Christ and Augustine of Hippo whose teaching on man, sin and grace formed the spring board of Western Oriented theology cannot be wished away as mere fits. These Africans played more crucial roles in the development of Christology and Christianity in general.

The efforts of the forefathers of African descent are an encouragement to African Christians. The Christianity practiced now is not western oriented perse – the notion that "Christianity is white man religion". It is Christianity whose foundation was laid by the intellectual input of some African church leader. Present African church leaders should borrow a leaf from the ability of their forefathers in the faith.

Those leaders should be studied and mirrowed in the light of African historiography. The pains, labour, pride and determination to succeed in any situation should be a guide to contemporary African Christians. African church leaders were among the foremost beginners of Christianity as a world religion and so present church leaders should not just smile away this prestige bequeathed to them.

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