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THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ACTS 17:24-28 FOR RESOLVING TRIBAL CONFLICTS: A CASE STUDY OF MOLO CONSTITUENCY, KENYA

Moses Njenga Ng'ang'a

Introduction

Kenya has experienced increased tribal animosity often leading to violent clashes between ethnic groups since 1990, Molo constituency in Nakuru district could easily be among the worst hit areas by this violence. This violence has caused wanton destruction of property, enormous loss of lives, leaving a great number of families homeless. The political and provincial administrative leaders have responded to these clashes by separation of the tribes and resettlement of the displaced victims in new land away from aggressors, usually as squatters. This approach not only fuels new violence but nurtures the desire for revenge albeit to recover the land lost in such circumstances. In this article we seek to establish the Biblical foundations for ethnic coexistence as seen in Acts 17:24-28; thereby attempting to build a theology of ethnic coexistence, before arriving at implications that this theology portends for the Church in Molo constituency of Nakuru district. The result of this work is expected to benefit not only the Church but also stakeholders involved in the process of healing and reconciliation of tribes.

The Background of the Problem

Factors that Promote Negative Ethnicity

Human beings are supposed to view themselves as a unit, especially when they occupy the same country and have a lot in common. This however is not always the case, people always result to such things as cultural and ethnic differences in order to exclude others and advance themselves and their own ethnic causes¹. Such reasons are at the root of

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the rivalry that has been seen in Molo constituency since the early 1990s. This ethnic hatred dates as far back to the pre-colonial and colonial Kenya and as such is definitely beyond the scope of our work, however, it is necessary to give a background of factors that promote negative ethnicity in Kenya.

It is the argument of John Lonsdale that negative ethnicity in Kenya is a product of five intrinsic trends which are part of the culture. First, he identifies political ethnicity as prominent and the most obvious form of ethnicity in Kenya today. He explains that political ethnicity is viewed as the propagation of hateful statement against another's ethnic group with a view to make that person appear bad to others, this is mostly done by leaders in order to secure their position by amalgamating their tribesmen to their side. The second is economic ethnicity based on the way different communities in the country share resources. Most violence is traced back to watering holes, pasture-land and other natural resources. Third, is moral ethnicity in which a person seeking to differentiate himself from the others sends negative messages to members of the other ethnic groups, which are interpreted as discriminative. Fourth, is the cultural ethnicity in which the ethnic passages in life become the defining factor of whom a person is rather than their other achievements causing discrimination in many spheres of life. The last factor of negative ethnicity is industrial; in which a popular view may be that only a certain ethnic group can be able to deal with certain jobs. This again breeds discrimination against others who though good in those jobs may not get the opportunities just because their ethnic group is not known for that kind of a job.²

These five trends given by Lonsdale are true especially when one considers the Molo ethnic clashes. It is also note worthy that though there may be no violence in other places in the country the same kind of negative ethnicity persists. We will therefore try to address them as the key reasons of negative ethnicity and the genesis of ethnic clashes in Molo constituency among other places in Kenya

¹ Edward Sapir, "Language, Race and Culture." In *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader*. Edited by Roxy Harris & Ben Rampton. (London: Routledge, 2003), 28-29.

² John Lonsdale "The Dynamics of Ethnic Developments in Africa: Moral & Political Argument in Kenya." In *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*. Edited by Bruce Berman et al. (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 75-81

The Missing Ingredient

There is no doubt that there is something missing; something that would make the diverse ethnic groups in Kenya to unite in the interest of the nation. Atieno Odhiambo gives a typical example of how the problem of ethnicity is viewed and tackled in Kenya throughout history of independent Kenya. Odhiambo states that the remedy of the problem lies in proper governance and non-ethnic politics but quickly adds that this is impossible for:

Kenya Africans do not talk of ethnicity in their offices... or in whispers along the streets. They talk and think about tribalism as the regular experience of their everyday lives... they use tribalism as a practical vocabulary of politics and social movement³.

The answer then cannot be in better governance for ethnicity is a problem of the orientation of culture rather than one of politics. It is here that Christianity must offer guidance seeing that the majority of Kenyans are Christians especially in our area of concern: Molo constituency. This gives room for the necessity of a theology that addresses the question of ethnicity. The Church has in the past kept quiet about this issue choosing rather to be involved in offering humanitarian aid rather than spiritual and socio-political guidance. It is time for the Church to take up the challenge of engaging this problem for the Church has a key to resolving this problem albeit in the coming generation of Kenyans who have not drunk the venom of ethnic hatred. It is this understanding that gives impetus to the study of the Bible in order to arrive at theology that will address this situation, a task to which we must now turn.

The Content of Acts 17:24-28

The passage is taken from Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus, on Mars Hill, on their idolatry. Paul in this passage is not dealing with the question of ethnicity, but one might capture hints of it as Paul attacks the feelings of superiority in the Athenians. We ought to bear in mind that Athens was the cradle of philosophy and the epitome of Greek pride, hence, to be Athenian was to be civilized and schooled in the philosophy of the day.⁴ We therefore may not rule out Paul's intention of dealing with their ethnic pride even as he dealt with their idolatry, for it was

³ E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "Hegemonic Enterprises & Instrumentality of Survival: Ethnicity & Democracy in Kenya" In *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa*, 172.

⁴ John Calvin "Acts" In *The Crossway Classic Commentary*, edited by Alister Mc Grath & J.I Packer, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1995), 295.

their view of themselves that made them blind to the true God. It has also been argued that Paul may have been arguing in defense of a Jewish school in Athens which was looked down upon. Scholars, who argue this way, point to archeological findings that reveal tombstones with Jewish names upon them.⁵ We need not make so much out of this, since Jews were scattered all over the province of Achaia, just as in Asia Minor and so their presence in Athens is not a surprise. Paul captures timeless truths that we ought to look at critically in order to resolve our problems with negative ethnicity.

Paul begins at the very beginning by talking about God whom the Athenians do not know but worship in ignorance. He identifies God as the creator of all that there is on earth. Paul also, in verse 24 states that God is above the realm of the activity of human beings, though he actually dwells among them. It is the same thought that is communicated in verse 25 where he states that God does not need anything from human beings though he gives all things to them. In other words, God is self sufficient⁶. In the same verse Paul also looks at human beings as limited and in need of God's help in all their essential requirements in life. We should be led to the inevitable conclusion then that even the wealth of the Athenians ultimately belongs to God; they owe Him even their very lives.

Verse 26 introduces a new thought that of the origin of different nations. He states that God made all nations from one person. The purpose of this creation being that man would inhabit the entire earth. Paul further states that it is God who determines the dwelling places of human beings and even the season in which they should occupy different places on earth. It is also noteworthy, that in this verse Paul introduces the idea of human beings being distributed all over the earth as an act of God. This idea is not strange to scripture. Paul is simply echoing the truth as recorded Genesis 10-11, in the story of the tower of Babel, and also the statement in Deuteronomy, which also states that borders of nations and even their gods were set by God⁷. The "times appointed" is a statement strategically located in order to force the Athenians to reflect on the temporal nature of life; this may be their season to be in Athens but in another time and generation Athens could be occupied by others⁸.

⁵ Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in the First Century Setting*, (Vol. 5) (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1996, 158.

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *The book of Acts*, (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1954), 357.

⁷ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 527.

⁸ Bruce, 358.

In verse 27 Paul identifies the reason of human beings being distributed on the face of the earth as being God's desire of them to worship him. Paul is further advancing his idea that God is in control by stating that the habitation of human beings is not by chance or the genius of human beings, but that the invisible hand of God is behind it.⁹ We must bear in mind that it is not the action of scattering people that causes them to seek God; God designed it that way from the beginning. Paul again may be alluding to the fact that it was the rebellion in Babel that caused the scattering, hence when people come closer to God then they realize that they are one¹⁰. The irony here is that the Athenians were claiming to be the epitome of civilization thereby discriminating against other people. Paul then cuts through their impunity by showing to them that their pride actually reveals their ignorance.

Paul summarizes his treatise with a poetic quotation from one of the Athenian poets in verse 28, stating that it is because of God that we all have the ability to move and are alive. He summarily states that we are all God's offspring; a thought that he will pick up in the subsequent verses to argue his case for the need for a relationship with God. The quotation from their poets must be seen, not as an appeal to authority, but as a rebuke to the Athenians; they have always had this truth and yet have not understood it. Lasor states that by this quotation, "He is stabbing at the heart of Athenian pride and Greek racial superiority. He is putting God at the center of the universe...."¹¹ We must concur, because to the Greek philosophy was everything and therefore to quote their poets was the ultimate demonstration of how far they had misunderstood the facts.

The Theology of Acts 17: 24-28

The Sovereignty of God

Paul identifies for us the fact that God is above all and that He is unquestioned in all that He does. The sovereignty of God is revealed not only in the fact of the creation, but also in the distribution and sustenance of all ethnic races. This truth is profound for it punctures through the human tendency to be puffed up and to emphasize the "otherliness" and over

⁹ Calvin, 302.

¹⁰ Witherington III, 528.

¹¹ William Sanford Lasor, *Church Alive*, (Glendale: Regal Books Division, 1972), 273.

emphasizing ones "ethnic correctness."¹² It is a truth that should make human beings realize that they are dependent not on their ethnic identity but on a higher identity. The impact of this should be felt in the way people relate by realizing that all resources belong to God and no one ought to claim monopoly of use of the resource. This should help in the clash prone area of Molo constituency where perceived ethnic superiority is used to decide who has monopoly over the other in the use of natural resources.

Unity of the Human Race

Another essential teaching of this passage is the emphasis in our understanding of anthropology. We note that human beings are essentially one; they are descended from one person and that this is by God's design. God is the author of diversity which is His way of dealing with man's rebellion (Gen.11). It is therefore a fact that, the further a person goes from God the more discriminative one becomes. Ethnic communities in Kenya today can benefit a lot by realizing that all ethnic communities are valuable in God's sight; created by Him and for His purpose. This would force them not only to respect each other but also to respect the value of human life. It is also important to note that even the habitation of ethnic communities is not just a result of the socio-political history of the country but it is God's hand.

We must state here that the separation of ethnic communities as way of toning down tension between them is not necessarily an answer to the conflict if anything it fuels the problem. The unfortunate consequence of separation is the continuous escalation of suspicion and hatred¹³. People tend to know each other more when they live together as one community rather than when they fragment into their ethnic groupings. Bauman properly articulates this when he says, "in a community we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback...."¹⁴ It would then appear that it is God's intention for people to live in their variety rather than to retreat into their ethnic groups. Our theology should then tell us that God intended for us to live as one community in diversity rather than many fragmented groups.

¹² George A. De Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation" In *Ethnic Identity* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1995), 25.

¹³ Mark G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible*, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers Inc., 2002.), 15.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1.

God has a Purpose in Ethnic Diversity

Diversity seems to scare many especially in the socio-political scene. Many tend to feel as though ethnic pluralism must inevitably lead to tensions and mayhem. It is rather unfortunate to note that the most ethnically divisive in our community are the elite who claim to be enlightened and seem to know the purpose of existence more than the general public. The general public sees diversity of culture as a blessing since they learn new things from it; but the elite with a feeling of heroism try to rally their ethnic groups against others for apparently no good reason.¹⁵

Paul addresses this problem in the passage when he reflects on the fact that the distribution of the ethnic groups is for a particular purpose. God desired that in the recognition of the diversity people would seek him. We must recognize that the object of seeking God is to give him worship as we enter into a living relationship with him. He therefore calls us back to the ultimate reason why man was created (Ecc.12:13): to worship God and continue in a vital relationship with him. This is a profound truth that should evoke awe in us and not hatred of people of other ethnic groups that are different from our own.

Implications of the Study

The Need for Teaching

Thus armed with a transforming theology the Church should take advantage in Molo area and spread the transforming message that diversity is not a cause for conflict but a cause for praise and worship. This truth should reverberate from our pulpits with the transformative force it deserves. The Church ought to be deliberate in the teaching of this truth not just from the pulpit but also in Bible studies and in the community groups where she is ably represented by her members. It is regrettable that the Church remains quiet and only plays the role of a relief agent when the violence occurs. De Vos observes that, "religious conversion is a means of abandoning ones ethnic identity by adopting a transcendent world view."¹⁶ In this then it does not matter what the popular opinion about the other community is. Christians can introduce new popular opinion by offering God's version of things hence abandoning the popular stance. The Church in Molo constituency should seize the opportunity and preach the gospel of

¹⁵ Ngugi Wa Thiong'o "The Language of African Literature" In *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader* edited by Roxy Harris & Ben Rampton (London: Routledge, 2003), 79.

¹⁶ De Vos, 21

social transformation for this is powerful door for many to the kingdom of God. The Church should realize that the people are undergoing a social crisis and are disillusioned not only with the political systems but also their ethnic heritage. It is only the transforming gospel of Christ that can help in such a situation.

The Need for Involvement

"The preacher or minister as... a social leader, now finds requirements of his role shifting from accommodation towards confrontation and protest."¹⁷ The Church is thrust so forcefully in the middle of the problem that she can extricate herself from the requirement to ascend the public podium to provide the spiritual and socio-political guidance required in such a community. It is very sad to observe the clergy go about their duty of feeding the displaced and preaching to them rather than coupling these noble actions with advocacy. The very politicians who fuel ethnic tensions attend Church services and not even a word of godly counsel is given by the pastor.

The media in Kenya takes very keen interest in the voice of the religious groups in Kenya the Church ought not to be silent in the issue of negative ethnicity. She should call to account all reckless talk in the public domain that fuels hatred and incites to violence. If the Church is the conscience of the community it does not help if she keeps quiet in the areas that affect the nation negatively.

The Need for Healing

We live in an age where many have been bruised by the instances of violence that have occurred in Molo constituency. Many have lost property and homes in the skirmishes and are living as squatters in Church, government or private land as squatters. The Church should look with mercy on these individuals and help them be resettled in their original homes. This can only happen if the Church believes that the true way forward is not just escaping the problem through resettlement, but rather head on confrontation through facilitating healing and reconciliation.

The restoration of a community that acknowledges the theology of Acts 17:24-28 is the onus of the Church. In this regard the Church has a head start for the communities living in the Molo constituency mainly share Christianity as a common religion. It has been observed that a shared

¹⁷ Ibid, 22

religion may be the strongest basis of identity in a community the strongest balm that can attend to the wounds of the community¹⁸. The Church should not only attempt healing for whole communities but also attend to the woes of individuals. This should be done not only by introducing the individuals to Christ but by also offering necessary counselling so that their wounds would really heal.

Conclusion

Acts 17:24-28 is a gemstone that every Church in Molo constituency ought to understand, teach and act upon. The Church should lead in paving the way for other stake holders in efforts to regain calmness and order in the clash torn constituency. The answer to this lies not in the separation of warring communities but rather in true and genuine healing based on the theology of Acts 17:24-28.

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¹⁸ Thomas A. Lewis, "On the Limits of Narrative: Communities in Pluralistic Society" *Journal of Religion*, 86.1, 55.

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