

Upholding Biblical Theology in the Emerging Context of Contextual Theologies

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Abstract

In recent decades, the rise of contextual theologies—particularly African Christian Theology—has been viewed as a means of making Christianity relevant to local cultures. Advocates argue that theology must speak in the idioms, symbols, and categories of its host cultures to achieve authenticity and resonance. While cultural engagement is vital, this article contends that defining theology primarily by geographical or cultural labels risks fragmenting the unity of the Christian faith. Biblical Theology, grounded in the inspired and authoritative Scriptures, provides the unifying framework for integrating cultural insights without compromising theological coherence. This study critiques the tendency to treat African Christian Theology as a distinct theological discipline, either on par with or separate from biblical theology. Such an approach can open the door to multiple culturally specific “theologies” that prioritize localized concerns over the universal truth of God’s revelation. While African experiences and contexts are valuable in illuminating biblical truths, they must remain subordinate to the hermeneutical authority of Scripture. Drawing on biblical, historical, and systematic perspectives, this article argues that the task of the theologian is not to create theology from culture but faithfully expound God’s Word into culture. It warns that the proliferation of regionally branded theologies could lead to theological relativism, in which truth is fragmented into competing narratives. In conclusion, this paper advocates for a renewed commitment to biblical theology as the universal standard, engaging cultural contexts without reducing theology to them, thereby preserving both the catholicity and unity of the Christian faith.

Keywords: Upholding, Biblical Theology, African Christian Theology, Contextual Theology, Bible and Culture



Introduction

In an era where cultural and regional particularities increasingly shape theology, the emergence of African Christian Theology and similar contextual frameworks has sparked vigorous debate about the nature and scope of theological discourse. While the desire to express the Christian faith in culturally resonant ways is both understandable and necessary, the danger lies in allowing cultural identity to become the primary determinant of theological method and content. This article contends that Biblical Theology—rooted in the inspired and authoritative Scriptures—must remain the universal foundation of Christian thought, providing the standard by which all contextual expressions are evaluated. When theology is defined primarily by geography or culture, the risk of fragmentation and relativism intensifies, potentially undermining the catholicity and unity of the church’s witness. By critically engaging with the development of African Christian Theology while affirming the value of cultural insights under the authority of Scripture, this study reasserts the primacy of Biblical Theology as the safeguard for truth in a pluralistic and divided age.

The Spread of Contextual Theologies

In recent decades, Christian theology has experienced an unprecedented rise in the number of contextual theologies—forms of theological reflection intentionally shaped by particular cultural, social, or political contexts. African Theology, Latin American Liberation Theology, Black Theology, Asian Feminist Theology, and numerous other variants have emerged, each seeking to articulate the Christian message in ways that resonate with its respective audience and address pertinent needs within its context. Advocates argue that these theologies allow Christianity to shed its Western garb and take root in indigenous soil.¹ While contextualization is necessary for effective witness, there is growing concern that elevating context to a primary theological source risks fragmenting the unity of the Christian faith and fostering theological relativism.²

African Christian theology, for instance, developed partly as a response to the perceived dominance of Western theological paradigms in African Christianity. Prominent African theologians such as John Mbiti and Kwame Bediako emphasized the need to incorporate African cultural categories, religious symbols, and worldviews into Christian theological expression.³

¹ Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3–5.

² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 27–29.

³ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29–31.



However, in the process, some formulations have blurred the line between biblical revelation and cultural traditions. This has raised the question of whether theology in such cases derives its authority from Scripture or from the cultural framework in which it is expressed.⁴ The concern is not with cultural engagement itself—Scripture was communicated in culturally embedded forms—but with the possibility that theology may become captive to its context rather than faithfully expounding God’s Word.

The proliferation of theologies bearing geographical or sociopolitical labels risks producing an ever-expanding catalog of localized “Christianity” rather than a unified theological witness. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer warns, when context becomes the controlling factor, the result may be “a babel of theologies” where no overarching standard exists to adjudicate truth claims.⁵ The problem is not merely academic; it has practical implications for the mission of the church, which is called to proclaim one gospel to all nations (Matt 28:18–20). Without a commitment to Biblical Theology as the universal framework, the church’s witness may devolve into competing narratives that reflect cultural preferences more than the revelation of God in Christ.

Aim and Scope of the Article

The primary aim of this article is to critically evaluate the contemporary trend of defining theology in terms of geographical and cultural boundaries, with a particular focus on African Christian Theology. While acknowledging the value of contextual engagement, the paper argues for the primacy of Biblical Theology as the universal and normative framework for theological reflection. According to Kevin J. Vanhoozer, theology is fundamentally “the application of Scripture to all areas of life.”⁶ This is the case rather than a reconstruction of theology based on cultural priorities. This perspective holds that theology’s authority derives from divine revelation rather than from cultural location. Although African Theology, while offering valuable cultural insights, must remain subordinate to the interpretive and doctrinal framework provided by Scripture.

The scope of this article includes a historical and methodological review of African Theology, an examination of Biblical Theology’s defining features, and a critical analysis of the risks associated with regionally-branded theologies. Kwame Bediako, one of the prominent

⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and in Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992), 4–7.

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 97.

⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 42.



proponents of African Theology, argues that African Christians must engage their pre-Christian heritage to articulate a theology that speaks meaningfully to their context.⁷ While his call for cultural engagement is commendable, this paper challenges the underlying assumption that theological identity should be geographically defined. Drawing on John Stott’s emphasis that “all true Christian preaching and theology is rooted in the Bible, relevant to the contemporary world, and yet transcends any one culture.”⁸ The paper maintains that contextualization must never lead to relativization.

Ultimately, this article is intended for theologians, pastors, and scholars who seek to preserve the unity and catholicity of the Christian faith amid theological fragmentation. As Lamin Sanneh observes, the translation of the gospel into diverse cultures does not imply the creation of new, independent theologies but the faithful embodiment of one gospel in many cultural forms.⁹ Echoing Carson’s warning that “biblical truth is not infinitely malleable to fit every cultural whim.”¹⁰ This paper calls for a renewed commitment to the global and timeless authority of Scripture. It will therefore be argued that Biblical Theology serves as the only legitimate framework within which contextual expressions of the faith can be both faithful and fruitful.

Methodology and Approach

This study adopts a theological-critical methodology that privileges the normative authority of Scripture while engaging critically with African theological scholarship. The approach is grounded in Biblical Theology, serving as the interpretive lens and the evaluative standard. Biblical Theology, understood as the discipline that traces the progressive revelation of God’s redemptive plan through the canonical Scriptures, ensures that theological claims are derived from, and accountable to, the inspired Word of God rather than from cultural constructs alone.¹¹ This methodological commitment aligns with Graeme Goldsworthy’s insistence that “Biblical theology has the task of setting forth the theology of the Bible itself, not merely theology about the Bible.”¹²

⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 9.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 29.

⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009), 200.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 57.

¹¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 5.

¹² Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 21.



The article, therefore, approaches African Christian Theology not as a competing framework, but as a contextual application of the unchanging biblical message.

In practical terms, the study employs a comparative and evaluative framework, examining the methodological underpinnings of African Christian Theology alongside the principles of Biblical Theology. John Stott’s conviction that “authentic contextualization begins with the Bible and moves toward the culture, not the reverse” serves as a guiding presupposition.¹³ At the same time, the work acknowledges the insights of African theologians such as Kwame Bediako, who argued that African Christianity’s vitality lies in its ability to appropriate the biblical message within African cultural idioms—yet always under the primacy of Scripture.¹⁴ This balance between cultural sensitivity and scriptural supremacy shapes the comparative analysis.

Theologically, the approach is normative yet dialogical—normative in affirming the finality of biblical revelation, and dialogical in recognizing the need to converse with the lived realities of African believers. This reflects Vanhoozer’s argument that theology is “the application of Scripture to all areas of life,” requiring both fidelity to the text and engagement with context.¹⁵ Accordingly, the study analyzes representative African theological works, assesses their hermeneutical presuppositions, and evaluates their doctrinal coherence with the biblical witness. This dual commitment—to biblical authority and to critical cultural engagement—ensures that the study neither dismisses African theological contributions nor compromises the unity of the Christian faith.

The Rise of African Christian Theology

The emergence of African Christian Theology in the mid-twentieth century was driven by a desire to articulate the Christian faith in authentically African ways, both in language and worldview. This theological movement arose in the context of post-colonial independence, as African theologians sought to shed what they perceived as the Western cultural clothing of Christianity and to affirm African identity within the church.¹⁶ Figures such as John Mbiti, Bolaji Idowu, and Kwame Bediako emphasized integrating African cultural heritage, religious categories, and

¹³ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian*, 67.

¹⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 236.

¹⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*: 45.

¹⁶ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 1–3.



communal values into theological reflection.¹⁷ While African Christian Theology has contributed significantly to making the gospel intelligible within African societies, its development has also raised questions regarding the balance between cultural contextualization and biblical authority. As Ogbu Kalu notes, the challenge lies in ensuring that “Africanization of Christianity does not become the Christianization of African culture.”¹⁸ This tension forms the backdrop for the present study, which affirms the value of contextual insights but contends that they must remain under the normative guidance of Biblical Theology.

Historical Emergence and Key Proponents

African Christian Theology emerged in the mid-20th century as a conscious effort by African Christian scholars to articulate the Christian faith in ways that addressed African cultural realities and historical experiences. This development coincided with the decolonization period, when African intellectuals in various disciplines sought to reclaim their cultural heritage and reshape academic discourse. In theological circles, scholars began to critique the perceived imposition of Western categories onto African Christianity, arguing for a theological expression that resonated with African worldviews and social contexts.¹⁹ John Mbiti, often regarded as one of the pioneers, emphasized that “Christianity is a religion which cannot be separated from the cultures into which it comes,” highlighting the need for theology that speaks to African life and thought.²⁰ The early movement thus aimed at contextual relevance, rooting theological reflection in African identity and experience.

Theological institutions in Africa, such as Makerere University in Uganda and the University of Ibadan in Nigeria, became important centers for the development of African Theology during the 1960s and 1970s.²¹ Alongside Mbiti, figures like Bolaji Idowu of Nigeria championed a re-examination of African Traditional Religion (ATR) in relation to Christianity, contending that ATR could provide categories for understanding the biblical message in African contexts.²² Similarly, Byang Kato, though critical of some contextualizing trends, acknowledged

¹⁷ E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: SCM Press, 1973), 85; Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 76–78.

¹⁸ Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), 14.

¹⁹ Jesse N. K. Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1989), 12.

²⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 239.

²¹ Gwinyai H. Muzorewa, *The Origins and Development of African Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 24–30; John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 223–27.

²² E. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition*, 103.



the necessity of engaging African culture, warning that such engagement must not compromise the universality of the gospel.²³ The emergence of African Christian Theology was therefore not monolithic; it encompassed both advocates of deep cultural integration and those cautioning against syncretism.

The movement gained momentum through ecumenical and continental platforms such as the All-Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), which facilitated theological dialogue among African scholars. Kwame Bediako advanced the discourse by arguing that the African experience of Christianity paralleled the early church's encounter with Greco-Roman culture, thus legitimizing contextual theological expression within a biblical framework.²⁴ Yet, as this paper will later argue, the historical trajectory of African Christian Theology also raises concerns about theological fragmentation, especially when contextual emphasis risks overshadowing the authority of Scripture. Nevertheless, the contributions of these key proponents remain indispensable for understanding the origins and evolution of African Christian Theology.

Contributions and Achievements of African Theology

African Theology has made significant contributions by affirming the cultural identity and dignity of African Christians and countering the historical perception that Christianity is inherently a Western religion. By retrieving African cultural heritage as a legitimate context for theological reflection, it has challenged colonial-era missionary assumptions that often dismissed indigenous traditions as entirely incompatible with the gospel. John Mbiti's pioneering work emphasized that "Christianity is not a stranger in Africa; it has been here for centuries and is at home here," thereby legitimizing African cultural expressions within the life of the church.²⁵ Similarly, Lamin Sanneh's concept of the "translatability" of the gospel highlighted that the Christian message inherently adapts to diverse linguistic and cultural contexts without losing its core content.²⁶ This affirmation has encouraged African believers to read the Bible through their own cultural lenses while maintaining continuity with the global Christian tradition.

Moreover, African Christian Theology has deepened the incarnational aspect of the Christian faith by insisting that the gospel must address the lived realities of African communities.

²³ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), 15

²⁴ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 229.

²⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 229.

²⁶ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 51.



Theologians such as Kwame Bediako argued that African Christianity thrives when it speaks to the existential challenges of its people—issues such as communal life, ancestor veneration, and the African worldview of interconnectedness.²⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye has expanded this conversation by introducing African women’s theological perspectives, drawing attention to how the gospel can address gender inequality and societal injustice in African contexts.²⁸ These contributions have enriched global theology by bringing neglected cultural and ethical dimensions into dialogue with biblical faith, offering a fuller understanding of how the gospel engages with culture in practice.

Finally, African Theology has played a crucial role in expanding theological discourse globally by presenting Africa not merely as a mission field but as a theological resource. By producing contextual hermeneutics rooted in African oral traditions, communal ethics, and symbolic²⁹ worldviews, African theologians have contributed fresh interpretive insights to the global church. Kwame Appiah notes that such contributions challenge the “monopoly of Western epistemologies” and invite a pluriform but dialogical understanding of theology. Through academic scholarship, ecclesial engagement, and the creation of African-led theological institutions, African Christian Theology has empowered the continent’s churches to take ownership of their theological identity. While these achievements are commendable, they also raise the question of whether theology should be primarily defined by cultural boundaries or by the unifying framework of biblical revelation—a question this article seeks to address in depth.

Common Methodological Approaches in African Christian Theology

African Christian Theology has generally developed through contextual and inculturational methodologies that seek to integrate the Christian message with African worldviews, languages, and cultural practices. Central to this is the method of *inculturation*, defined by Laurenti Magesa as “the ongoing dialogue between faith and culture, aimed at making the gospel genuinely at home in a people’s life and thought.”³⁰ This approach often begins with African cultural categories, such as kinship, community ethics, and cosmology, and seeks to reinterpret Christian doctrines through

²⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 106.

²⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Beads and Strands: Reflections of an African Woman on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 72.

²⁹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 156.

³⁰ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 10.



them. John Parratt observes that African theologians have consciously moved away from merely importing Western theological frameworks toward constructing a theology that resonates with African experiences and self-understanding.³¹ This methodological shift emphasizes the legitimacy of African cultural resources as theological starting points.

Another significant methodological approach is narrative and oral theology, which draws on Africa's rich oral traditions as vehicles for expressing theological truth. Bediako highlights that Africa's predominantly oral heritage provides a natural platform for communicating the biblical story in ways that resonate deeply with local audiences.³² This method often employs proverbs, storytelling, and songs as interpretive tools, thereby privileging communal and experiential expressions of faith over abstract doctrinal formulations. However, while such narrative approaches can powerfully communicate biblical themes, they also risk allowing cultural narratives to overshadow the biblical metanarrative if not grounded in the authority of Scripture. The method's strength lies in its ability to bridge the cultural distance between the biblical world and African contexts. Still, its weakness lies in its tendency to allow cultural categories to dictate theological conclusions.

A third common method is liberation-oriented theology, which focuses on addressing Africa's socio-political realities—poverty, injustice, and post-colonial identity struggles—through a theological lens. Mercy Oduyoye has argued that theology in Africa must respond to the lived oppression of African peoples, particularly women, by engaging in transformative praxis.³³ This method frequently draws inspiration from Latin American liberation theology while grounding its praxis in African communal ethics. Yet, as Byang Kato warned, a liberation focus that treats the Bible primarily as a tool for social change risks reducing the gospel to a sociopolitical program, thereby sidelining its primary redemptive message.³⁴ These varied methodological approaches—inculturation, narrative/oral theology, and liberation praxis—illustrate the richness and diversity of African Christian Theology, while also revealing the need for careful evaluation to ensure that cultural and political engagement remains firmly rooted in the biblical witness.

³¹ John Parratt, *Introduction to Third World Theologies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 71.

³² Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 58.

³³ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women's Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2001), 8.

³⁴ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*, 13.



The Case for Biblical Theology as the Primary Framework

Biblical Theology provides the essential framework for safeguarding the unity, authority, and universality of Christian doctrine, ensuring that theological formulation remains grounded in God’s self-revelation in Scripture rather than in fluctuating cultural norms. Biblical Theology “moves along the Bible’s own historical and theological development” and resists the imposition of external systems that might distort its message.³⁵ By rooting theological discourse in the canonical narrative, the church is protected from the risk of theological relativism that emerges when context becomes the primary determinant of truth. Christopher Wright similarly emphasizes that the mission and message of the church must flow from the “whole counsel of God” as revealed in Scripture, which alone has authority over all cultures and contexts.³⁶ While African cultural insights can illuminate biblical truth, they must remain subject to the interpretive authority of the Word of God, lest theology lose its catholicity and become a collection of competing regional perspectives. Graeme Goldsworthy captures this balance, asserting that “the task of Biblical Theology is to let the Bible speak for itself, in its own terms, and then to apply its message to every context without altering its substance.”³⁷ Thus, Biblical Theology is not opposed to cultural engagement; rather, it is the necessary starting point and regulating principle for every contextual application, preserving the unity of the Christian faith across geographical and cultural boundaries.

Definition and Scope of Biblical Theology

Biblical Theology may be defined as the disciplined study of the progressive revelation of God’s redemptive plan as it unfolds within the historical framework of Scripture. It seeks to understand the theology of the Bible in its own terms, following the contours of God’s self-disclosure through historical events, covenants, and ultimately in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Geerhardus Vos, often called the father of Reformed Biblical Theology, defines it as “that branch of exegetical theology which deals with the process of the self-revelation of God deposited in the Bible.”³⁸ Unlike systematic theology, which organizes doctrines thematically, Biblical Theology traces the

³⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 94.

³⁶ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 35.

³⁷ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 24.

³⁸ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 5.



unfolding storyline of Scripture, giving due weight to the historical and literary contexts of each part.³⁹

The scope of Biblical Theology extends from Genesis to Revelation, viewing the canon as a unified narrative that culminates in Christ. Graeme Goldsworthy emphasizes that “the unity of the Bible lies in its central focus on the person and work of Jesus,”⁴⁰ meaning that both Old and New Testaments must be interpreted in light of their witness to Him. This canonical perspective safeguards theological interpretation from fragmentation, ensuring that individual texts are understood within the overarching redemptive storyline. In this sense, Biblical Theology is not limited to academic exegesis; it provides the interpretive framework for preaching, teaching, and discipleship that is faithful to the biblical witness as a whole.⁴¹

Furthermore, Biblical Theology functions as the theological compass for engaging culture, including African contexts, without subordinating divine revelation to cultural norms. D. A. Carson insists that Biblical Theology “enables us to hear the text on its own terms” and resists the imposition of alien philosophical or cultural categories onto the biblical message.⁴² Grounding theology in the inspired text ensures that contextual application flows from God’s revealed truth rather than from human invention. This makes Biblical Theology the essential foundation for all theological reflection, safeguarding the unity and catholicity of the Christian faith across geographical and cultural boundaries.

The Authority of Scripture in Theological Formulation

The authority of Scripture stands as the foundational principle in all theological formulation, for it is through the inspired and inerrant Word of God that divine truth is revealed. Scripture, as Paul affirms, is “God-breathed” and therefore “useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Geerhardus Vos emphasizes that theology must “draw its material from the Scriptures themselves” if it is to remain a faithful reflection of divine revelation.⁴³ This conviction guards against elevating cultural norms or philosophical systems above the biblical witness. In the African context, where cultural traditions hold significant sway, the temptation to derive theological content from heritage or communal experience is strong. Yet, as Anthony

³⁹ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 20.

⁴⁰ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible*, 54.

⁴¹ Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 13.

⁴² D. A. Carson, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 101.

⁴³ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, 5.



Thiselton cautions, without the governing authority of Scripture, theological discourse risks becoming “a mirror of our cultural and ideological presuppositions rather than a faithful hearing of God’s Word.”⁴⁴

The primacy of Scripture also ensures theological unity across diverse cultures. John Frame underscores that Scripture is not merely a source among others but “the ultimate criterion by which all claims to truth must be judged.”⁴⁵ This universality prevents theology from fragmenting into relativistic narratives shaped solely by local contexts. While African cultural insights can enrich theological reflection, they must be subject to what Bediako calls the “hermeneutical control” of Scripture, which safeguards the universality of the gospel message while allowing for contextual application.⁴⁶ Without this control, the line between legitimate contextualization and syncretism becomes blurred, leading to theological distortion.

Further, the authority of Scripture provides the interpretive norm that guides the church in addressing new and complex challenges. Vanhoozer describes this as the “canonical criterion,” by which theology is tethered to the biblical canon’s coherent narrative and doctrinal framework.⁴⁷ This ensures that theological development is not an exercise in creative speculation but a faithful unfolding of God’s self-revelation. For the African Christian theologian, this means engaging culture not as an equal source of authority but as a field into which the biblical message must be faithfully proclaimed and applied. Only by maintaining Scripture’s supreme authority can theology remain authentically Christian and universally binding across geographical and cultural boundaries.

How Context Informs but Does Not Determine Theology

Theological reflection inevitably takes place within a cultural context, and Scripture itself demonstrates God’s communication through historical and linguistic settings. Context can illuminate the text by highlighting aspects of biblical truth that may be more readily understood or emphasized in certain cultures. As Andrew Walls observes, “The translation of the gospel into the thought forms of a culture is not an optional extra, but part of the dynamic of the Christian faith.”⁴⁸ African cultural insights, for instance, can enrich the church’s grasp of biblical metaphors,

⁴⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 23.

⁴⁵ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 8.

⁴⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity*, 229.

⁴⁷ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 45.

⁴⁸ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 26.



communal ethics, and spiritual realities. However, while context can serve as a lens that brings certain truths into sharper focus, it is not the source of those truths. The source remains the revealed Word of God, which transcends every cultural framework.⁴⁹

The authority of theology rests not in its cultural resonance but in its faithfulness to divine revelation. Karl Barth famously insisted that theology must be a “repetition” of God’s own speech, not a construction of human religious consciousness.⁵⁰ When context becomes the primary determinant of theology, the danger of subjectivism and relativism arises, leading to conflicting theological norms across competing contexts. John Frame similarly argues that while theology must address contemporary concerns, “our situation is never the final court of appeal; Scripture alone has that status.”⁵¹ Thus, cultural context functions as the setting in which theology is applied, not as the criterion by which it is defined.

A biblically faithful approach maintains a clear hermeneutical hierarchy, with Scripture as the supreme authority and context as a secondary but important consideration. Kevin Vanhoozer describes this as “theology in transit,” where the gospel message moves across cultures without losing its canonical content.⁵² This ensures that the unchanging truths of the Bible can be embodied in diverse forms without being altered by them. Consequently, the task of the theologian is to allow the biblical text to shape culture, not vice versa, so that theology remains universally true while being locally meaningful.

Risks of Geographically-Defined Theologies

The categorization of theology according to geography—such as “African Theology” or “Asian Theology”—carries the inherent risk of fragmenting the universal truth of the Christian faith into localized expressions that may drift toward theological relativism. When cultural or national boundaries primarily define theology, it risks elevating contextual concerns over the normative authority of Scripture, leading to doctrinal innovation that may be more reflective of cultural priorities than of biblical revelation. Andrew F. Walls warns that while cultural expressions of the gospel are inevitable, they must remain under the “transcultural permanence of the Christian message,” lest the gospel lose its universal claim.⁵³ Similarly, John Mbiti, though a pioneer in

⁴⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, 28.

⁵⁰ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 3.

⁵¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*, 77.

⁵² Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 20.

⁵³ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 27.



articulating African perspectives, cautioned that contextual theology becomes problematic when “cultural loyalty overtakes loyalty to Christ.”⁵⁴ Kevin Vanhoozer likewise emphasizes that grounding theology in anything other than the canonical Scriptures risks creating “competing local narratives” that undermine the catholicity of the church.⁵⁵ For these reasons, geographical labels in theology should serve descriptive purposes at best, not as prescriptive frameworks that redefine the substance of Christian doctrine.

Theological Fragmentation and Relativism

One of the primary risks of geographically defined theologies is theological fragmentation, in which the proliferation of localized theological systems compromises the unity of Christian doctrine. When theology is primarily framed by culture rather than by the authority of Scripture, it risks creating multiple theological “centers,” each with its own interpretive priorities and doctrinal emphases. Andrew F. Walls warns that while Christianity is inherently translatable into different cultures, “it is never safe to allow any cultural expression to become normative for the faith as a whole.”⁵⁶ Without a unifying biblical foundation, geographically labeled theologies can unintentionally promote competing truth claims, undermining the catholicity of the church’s confession.

Closely related to fragmentation is the danger of theological relativism, in which truth is perceived as culturally contingent rather than universally binding. Lamin Sanneh observes that while translation of the gospel into local idioms is essential, “the danger arises when the translated form becomes the measure of the gospel itself, rather than the gospel being the measure of the translation.”⁵⁷ This inversion can lead to theological innovations that prioritize cultural affirmation over biblical fidelity. In such a context, doctrines can be adapted or even redefined to fit local sensibilities, resulting in a relativistic pluralism where no single theological standard is recognized as normative for the global church.

Furthermore, relativism, fueled by theological fragmentation, erodes the possibility of meaningful doctrinal accountability within the global body of Christ. Kevin Vanhoozer argues that “when each community determines truth for itself, the result is not a rich diversity but a cacophony

⁵⁴ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

⁵⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 45.

⁵⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 51.

⁵⁷ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 211.



of competing voices without harmony.”⁵⁸ This doctrinal dissonance weakens the church’s witness, as the gospel message is perceived as one among many equally valid narratives. The antidote lies in anchoring theology in the canon of Scripture, which transcends cultural boundaries while speaking to them, thereby maintaining both unity and diversity within the household of faith.

Dilution of the Universal Nature of the Gospel

One of the most significant risks posed by geographically defined theologies is the weakening of the gospel’s universal scope. Scripture presents the gospel as a transcendent and culture-transcending proclamation, “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16)—a message not bound to any single ethnic, social, or geographical identity. When theology is framed primarily by cultural or regional markers, it can inadvertently foster a sense that the gospel is fundamentally different for each cultural group. Wright warns that while contextualization is essential, “it must not be allowed to obscure or diminish the reality that the gospel is for all nations in the same way, through the same Lord Jesus Christ.”⁵⁹ Such obscuration risks turning theology into a set of local religious systems rather than a shared confession of faith anchored in God’s redemptive acts.

Geographically defined theologies may also unintentionally promote cultural absolutism, elevating particular customs and perspectives to near-doctrinal status. This can blur the line between the eternal truths of God’s Word and the temporal realities of human culture. Andrew Walls observes that while Christianity has always been translatable into diverse cultural forms, the danger lies in “allowing the local expression to become the totality of the faith,” thereby eclipsing its catholic nature.⁶⁰ Such theological parochialism risks undermining the unity of the global church, which is rooted not in cultural affinity but in the shared confession of Christ as Lord.

Furthermore, an overemphasis on geographical identity in theology can hinder the church’s mission by limiting its capacity to speak prophetically across cultures. Sanneh notes that Christianity’s global spread is due in part to its ability to be “at home in every culture” while also challenging every culture by the authority of Scripture.⁶¹ When theological discourse is reduced to regional frameworks, it can lose this prophetic universality, leading instead to insular

⁵⁸ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 288.

⁵⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, 534.

⁶⁰ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 26.

⁶¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 97.



perspectives that weaken the church’s witness to the nations. In this way, geographically defined theologies risk diluting not only the universality of the gospel but also the global mission entrusted to the church.

The Danger of Doctrinal Innovation Rooted in Culture

One of the primary dangers of geographically defined theologies is the tendency for cultural identity to become a formative source of doctrine rather than a context for its application. When theological method begins with culture instead of Scripture, the result is often doctrinal innovation that departs from the apostolic faith. Andrew Walls warns that while the gospel must be expressed in local idioms, “translating” the faith into culture without the controlling norm of Scripture risks producing “a domesticated version of the gospel” shaped more by local values than divine revelation.⁶² This danger becomes acute when African Christian Theology, or any contextual theology, treats indigenous religious categories as the primary hermeneutical key, leading to reinterpretations of central doctrines that obscure their biblical foundations.

Such innovations often emerge from well-intentioned efforts to make Christianity “at home” in a given culture but may inadvertently dilute or distort its truth claims. Lamin Sanneh observes that while vernacular translation affirms the universal accessibility of the gospel, it also opens the door for syncretism if the cultural framework becomes the arbiter of meaning.⁶³ This can result in redefinitions of Christology, soteriology, or ecclesiology that reflect traditional religious cosmologies rather than the canonical witness. John Mbiti himself, despite advocating for theological engagement with African worldviews, cautioned against uncritically importing pre-Christian religious concepts into Christian theology, recognizing the risk of creating a hybrid faith that departs from biblical orthodoxy.⁶⁴ Such doctrinal shifts, though clothed in contextual language, can undermine the catholicity of the church and compromise its witness.

The historical record offers sobering examples of how culturally driven theological revisionism can fracture Christian unity. When the cultural horizon becomes the controlling authority, “the drama of redemption” is re-scripted according to local narratives, fragmenting the metanarrative of Scripture.⁶⁵ Similarly, Carl Henry warned that relativizing truth to cultural norms inevitably leads to theological pluralism, in which no authoritative standard exists beyond

⁶² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 53.

⁶³ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 212.

⁶⁴ John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 32.

⁶⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 91.



communal preference.⁶⁶ In the African context, this could mean each ethnic or regional expression of the church producing its own theological framework, resulting in a patchwork of theologies with competing truth claims. To guard against this, theologians must affirm that while culture enriches theological expression, it can never serve as the final criterion for doctrinal formulation; only the Word of God holds that authority.

Toward a Scripture-Centered Engagement with Culture

A Scripture-centered engagement with culture insists that the Bible serves not merely as a source of theological data but as the ultimate authority that shapes how the Christian faith interacts with any cultural setting. Such engagement follows the apostolic model, in which the unchanging gospel was proclaimed in diverse cultural contexts without surrendering its theological substance (Acts 17:22–31). As Christopher Wright observes, “Mission is bringing the whole of the Bible to bear on the whole of human life,” underscoring that cultural relevance must flow from faithful biblical exposition rather than cultural accommodation.⁶⁷ Similarly, Stott argues that true contextualization “begins with the Bible and moves toward the culture” so that culture is transformed by the Word, not the other way around.⁶⁸ This approach affirms the value of African cultural insights in enriching theological understanding, yet it resists the tendency to derive theology from culture itself. In this way, Scripture remains the norming norm (*norma normans*), ensuring that theological reflection in Africa—and elsewhere—preserves the catholicity, unity, and doctrinal integrity of the Christian faith.

Biblical Models for Contextual Application

The apostolic ministry of Paul provides perhaps the most compelling biblical model for engaging culture without compromising the gospel’s integrity. In 1 Corinthians 9:19–23, Paul declares his willingness to “become all things to all people” for the sake of the gospel, a statement that demonstrates both adaptability and theological steadfastness. This approach reflects a principle of *cultural accommodation* that is always subordinate to the message of Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:2). As Schnabel notes, Paul’s missionary strategy “never involved altering the content of the gospel,

⁶⁶ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, Vol. 1: God Who Speaks and Shows* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999), 236.

⁶⁷ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, 534.

⁶⁸ John Stott, *The Contemporary Christian: Applying God’s Word to Today’s World*, 67.



only adjusting the mode of presentation to reach his hearers effectively.”⁶⁹ The Pauline model thus affirms that cultural sensitivity is a missional necessity, but it must never result in theological relativism.⁷⁰

Paul’s ministry in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) offers another example of contextual application. Here, Paul engages Greek philosophers on Mars Hill by beginning with their religious symbols and philosophical categories—quoting Greek poets such as Epimenides and Aratus (Acts 17:28)—before directing them to the truth of the resurrection. Christopher Wright observes that this method demonstrates a “redemptive engagement” with culture, where existing beliefs are affirmed in part but ultimately reoriented toward the knowledge of the living God.⁷¹ By starting with their worldview yet challenging it with biblical revelation, Paul models a hermeneutic that is both incarnational and confrontational.⁷² This approach has enduring relevance for African contexts, where theological engagement must affirm what aligns with Scripture while confronting elements that oppose the gospel.

The biblical pattern, therefore, calls for an approach that is deeply rooted in Scripture while engaging meaningfully with cultural realities. Vanhoozer argues that the task of theology is to “perform the script” of Scripture faithfully in each new context, ensuring that the drama of redemption is communicated with both clarity and contextual relevance.⁷³ Similarly, Walls maintains that the gospel is “infinitely translatable” into any culture without losing its essence, because its truth is anchored in God’s revelation rather than in human tradition.⁷⁴ This study affirms that African theologians, like Paul, must be prepared to speak the gospel in culturally intelligible forms while resisting the temptation to let culture define theological content. Such a Scripture-centered engagement safeguards the universality of the faith and ensures that contextualization serves mission rather than distorting the message.

⁶⁹ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 457.

⁷⁰ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 124.

⁷¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, 414.

⁷² Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 54.

⁷³ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 42.

⁷⁴ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 27.



The Role of African Cultural Insights within Biblical Theology

African cultural insights, when approached under the authority of Scripture, can serve as valuable tools for illuminating biblical truths and deepening theological understanding. The narrative richness, communal ethos, and symbolic worldview prevalent in many African societies provide interpretive lenses that can help the church grasp the holistic and relational nature of the biblical message. For example, the African emphasis on community resonates with the biblical portrayal of the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:12–27), where the identity of the believer is inseparable from their belonging to the covenant community. John Mbiti’s assertion that “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am” captures this relational anthropology, which aligns with the scriptural vision of interdependence in the body of Christ, though it must be critically evaluated to avoid subsuming biblical identity under purely social definitions.⁷⁵

Moreover, African oral traditions, storytelling, and proverbs offer pedagogical parallels to the didactic methods found in Scripture, particularly in the wisdom literature (e.g., Prov 1:1–7). As Andrew Walls observes, African modes of communication “share structural affinities with the narrative and poetic forms of the biblical text,” enabling African Christians to grasp the drama of redemption in culturally resonant ways without distorting the message.⁷⁶ Kwame Bediako similarly notes that African categories can be “a bridge rather than a barrier” to biblical truth, provided they are reinterpreted through the gospel’s transformative power.⁷⁷ In this way, cultural symbols such as covenant rituals, kinship obligations, and rites of passage can serve as illustrative analogies for biblical themes such as the new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34) and adoption into God’s family (Rom. 8:15–17), provided Scripture remains the controlling authority.

Nevertheless, Biblical Theology demands that all cultural insights be subjected to the hermeneutical scrutiny of God’s revealed Word. As Lamin Sanneh warns, the uncritical use of cultural categories risks syncretism, in which biblical concepts are reshaped to fit pre-existing worldviews rather than transforming them.⁷⁸ Kevin Vanhoozer adds that the task of the theologian is “to bring the culture into the world of the text, not the text into the world of the culture,” ensuring that cultural forms are redeemed rather than relativized, thereby preserving the truth of Scripture.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 141.

⁷⁶ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 8.

⁷⁷ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 102.

⁷⁸ Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West*, 94.

⁷⁹ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 26.



Thus, African cultural insights should not function as independent theological sources but rather as contextual windows through which the unchanging gospel can be communicated effectively. This approach allows the African church to remain authentically rooted in its cultural soil while standing firmly on the universal foundation of biblical revelation.

Preserving the Unity of the Faith Across Cultures

The unity of the Christian faith is rooted in the shared confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and the authority of the apostolic witness preserved in Scripture (Eph 4:4–6). This unity transcends geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries, forming one body of Christ comprised of diverse members (1 Cor 12:12–13). As Walls observes, the “indigenizing principle” ensures that the faith becomes at home in every culture, while the “pilgrim principle” calls every culture to be transformed by the gospel.⁸⁰ The challenge, therefore, is to engage culture without allowing it to redefine or fragment the faith. Biblical Theology provides the framework for this, offering a single canon and a unified redemptive narrative that binds believers across contexts.⁸¹ This scriptural unity is not uniformity but harmony, where cultural diversity enriches the global church without compromising doctrinal integrity.

Maintaining unity requires that all theological reflection be subject to the interpretive authority of Scripture. John Calvin, commenting on Ephesians 4:13, stressed that believers must “be governed by the one Word of God” to prevent schism and error.⁸² In the African context, Bediako cautions that while African cultural resources can illuminate the biblical text, they must not be elevated above the Word.⁸³ The danger lies in allowing localized theological innovations to operate independently of the universal witness of Scripture, which can lead to competing, contradictory interpretations. As Vanhoozer reminds, the church’s unity is a “communicative act,” sustained by the shared performance of the biblical script across cultures.⁸⁴ Thus, safeguarding unity means continually aligning theological expression with the unchanging revelation of God, even as it is articulated in diverse cultural idioms.

Practically, this safeguarding involves intentional cross-cultural theological dialogue, mutual accountability among churches, and prioritizing biblical exegesis over cultural preferences.

⁸⁰ Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, 7–9.

⁸¹ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*, 5.

⁸² John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 282.

⁸³ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, 108–110.

⁸⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 42–43.



The apostle Paul exemplified this in his missionary work, adapting to different cultural contexts while remaining faithful to the gospel message (1 Cor 9:19–23). Lamin Sanneh notes that the gospel’s translatability enables it to be expressed in all cultures without losing its essence.⁸⁵ When cultural insights are integrated into theology under the lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture, the church maintains its catholicity and avoids theological relativism. In this way, the global body of Christ becomes a living testimony to Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21—that His followers may be one, “so that the world may believe.”

Conclusion

This article has argued that while African Christian Theology has made significant contributions in contextualizing the Christian faith within African cultural realities, theology must ultimately be anchored in the unchanging authority of Scripture. The historical emergence of African Christian Theology, its methodological tendencies, and its emphasis on cultural relevance were examined in light of Biblical Theology’s insistence on deriving theological truth from the progressive revelation of God’s Word. The study has shown that while context can enrich understanding, it must never determine or redefine the content of theology. Reducing theology to a cultural or geographical label risks fragmenting the faith into competing theological expressions, undermining the universality of the gospel message.

Consequently, there is a pressing call for theological integrity—one that safeguards doctrinal purity while affirming cultural engagement. Biblical Theology provides the necessary framework for this balance, ensuring that contextual insights serve the gospel rather than reshape it. In an increasingly pluralistic and globalized theological environment, maintaining unity in the faith requires more than shared traditions; it demands a shared submission to the authority of Scripture. This unity is not uniformity of expression, but fidelity to the same revealed truth across diverse contexts. African theologians, therefore, have the responsibility to champion a theology that reflects both the richness of African heritage and the immutability of God’s Word.

For the African theologian, the way forward is neither a rejection of cultural identity nor an uncritical embrace of contextual innovation, but a faithful witness to the biblical message in culturally resonant ways. This means engaging Africa’s deep spiritual traditions, ethical questions, and communal values through the lens of Scripture, allowing the Word of God to affirm what is

⁸⁵ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 51–53.



true, correct what is false, and transform what is broken. In doing so, African theology will not stand apart from the global Christian witness but will enrich it—offering a vibrant, biblically faithful voice that speaks from Africa to the world and upholds the unity of the body of Christ in an age of theological fragmentation.

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