

OLD THINGS HAVE PASSED AWAY: A CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5:17 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CHRISTIAN IDENTITY IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

The concept of Christian identity remains a central concern in contemporary Nigerian society, where cultural pluralism, religious syncretism, and moral decline pose serious challenges to authentic Christian living. This study, titled “Old Things Have Passed Away: A Contextual Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Its Implications for Christian Identity in Nigerian Society”, explores the transformative nature of the Christian life as presented in Pauline theology. The statement of the problem arises from the increasing gap between professed Christian faith and actual lifestyle among Nigerian Christians, where old patterns of corruption, materialism, and moral laxity persist despite religious commitments. Employing a contextual and exegetical methodology, the research critically analyzes 2 Corinthians 5:17 while integrating socio-cultural analysis to uncover its practical relevance. Findings reveal that Paul’s assertion of becoming a “new creation” demands a radical break from sinful patterns and a reconstruction of identity anchored in Christ rather than cultural pressures or societal expectations. The study concludes that Christian identity in Nigeria is endangered by nominalism and the accommodation of old habits that contradict biblical transformation. It recommends intentional discipleship, contextualized Christian education, and the re-emphasis of ethical formation in churches as vital strategies for building authentic Christian identity. The research ultimately argues that for Nigerian Christians to embody true newness in Christ, the old ways of corruption, ethnic rivalry, and materialistic orientation must give way to a Christ-centered life that transforms both the individual and the larger society.

Keywords: Old Things Have Passed Away, Contextual Analysis, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Christian Identity, Nigerian Society.

Background of the Study

The Christian faith, particularly within the Nigerian context, is characterized by a rich and vibrant expression that continues to shape the moral, social, and spiritual life of the people. Nigeria, as one of the most religiously active nations in Africa, has witnessed remarkable growth in Christian denominations and church attendance. However, this outward religiosity has not always translated into genuine transformation of life and character. The Apostle Paul’s declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:17, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new,” provides a biblical framework for understanding the essence of Christian identity as a call to radical renewal. This text underscores the necessity of leaving behind sinful patterns and embracing a life that reflects the newness brought about by union with Christ. The motivation for this study arises from the researcher’s personal observations. First, despite the proliferation of churches in urban centers of Nigeria, there is an alarming persistence of corruption, dishonesty, and materialistic tendencies even among professing Christians. This contradiction between faith and practice raises questions about the practical implications of Paul’s teaching on the “new creation.” Second, the researcher observed in community interactions that many believers still cling to cultural practices that conflict with Christian values, such as ethnic rivalry and unwholesome traditional rituals, thereby diluting the authenticity of their Christian witness. These observations point to a crisis of identity where “old things” appear to remain unchallenged in the lives of many Nigerian Christians. Therefore, this study seeks to provide a contextual analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:17 in order to address this tension and to highlight its implications for shaping authentic Christian identity in Nigerian society. By doing so, it hopes to contribute to the ongoing discourse on the need for ethical renewal and Christ-centered living in the nation.

Definition of Terms

Old Things

According to Eboh (2015), “old things” refers to the former patterns of life characterized by sin, moral weakness, and values that are inconsistent with the new life in Christ.

Passed Away

According to Okorie (2018), “passed away” denotes the decisive end of the old sinful nature and its replacement with a transformed life in Christ.

Contextual Analysis

According to Nwaigbo (2012), contextual analysis is the interpretation of a biblical text with close attention to its original setting while relating its meaning to the contemporary socio-cultural environment of the reader.

2 Corinthians 5:17

According to Udoekpo (2010), 2 Corinthians 5:17 expresses Paul’s theology of transformation, where anyone united with Christ becomes a “new creation,” signifying a total change of identity and life orientation.

Implications

According to Onwu (2014), implications refer to the practical consequences or outcomes that naturally flow from the meaning of a text or concept, especially as it applies to faith and social life.

Christian Identity

According to Oguejiofor (2016), Christian identity refers to the distinctive way of life and self-understanding that flows from a believer’s union with Christ, marked by transformed character and commitment to gospel values.

Nigerian Society

According to Akinyemi (2015), Nigerian society refers to the complex social structure made up of diverse ethnic groups, religions, and cultural values that interact to shape the nation’s political, moral, and economic life.

Concept of Christian Identity

Christian identity remains one of the central themes of biblical and theological studies, particularly in contexts where culture and religion intersect. In Nigeria, the understanding of Christian identity has been widely discussed by scholars who emphasize that being a Christian transcends mere church attendance or nominal association with Christ. Okeke (2013) stresses that Christian identity is essentially rooted in the transformation of life and character, which distinguishes the believer from the surrounding society. For him, identity in Christ is a radical departure from the old nature and a visible manifestation of new life in conduct and relationships. Similarly, Eboh (2015) argues that Christian identity must reflect the values of holiness, love, and integrity in everyday living, as these virtues stand in contrast to the corruption, greed, and moral laxity prevalent in Nigerian society. Iwuoha (2012) further develops this argument by highlighting that Christian identity is not simply individualistic but also communal. The believer finds identity within the church community, where discipleship and mutual edification help sustain the newness of life promised in Christ. Hence, Christian identity is not only about personal piety but also about the believer’s social responsibility and witness in the larger society. These perspectives underscore that Christian identity entails both internal transformation and external testimony, both of which are central to Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 5:17.

Paul’s theology of the new creation in 2 Corinthians 5:17 has attracted significant scholarly attention in Nigeria. Nwankwo (2014) observes that Paul’s declaration of becoming a “new creation” is not a metaphorical statement but a theological reality grounded in Christ’s redemptive work. According to him, the “old” refers to sinful orientations and ways of life that dominated the believer before salvation, while the “new” points to a renewed existence under the lordship of Christ. Njoku (2016) adds that this Pauline idea is transformative and comprehensive, affecting not only the believer’s spiritual life but also ethical, social, and cultural engagements. Ugwu (2011) further interprets Paul’s theology as a call to identity reconstruction. He insists that when Paul speaks of newness, he envisions a believer whose worldview, relationships, and cultural practices are reshaped by the gospel. For Nigerian Christians, this theology implies that the pervasive habits of bribery, tribalism, and materialism must be abandoned for authentic faith to emerge. Ezenwa (2010) supports this by stressing that Pauline theology makes it impossible to reconcile new life in Christ with continued indulgence in practices that contradict the gospel.

Thus, the Pauline theology of new creation provides a theological foundation for examining the contradictions in Nigerian Christianity where “old things” often appear to persist.

Nigerian Socio-Religious Context and Identity Challenges

The Nigerian socio-religious context presents a unique challenge to the appropriation of Christian identity. As Oguejiofor (2012) explains, Nigeria is a deeply pluralistic society where Christianity, Islam, and African Traditional Religion coexist. This pluralism often creates tension for Christians who must negotiate their faith amidst competing cultural and religious expectations. In many cases, Christians adopt syncretistic practices that blur the line between biblical faith and traditional customs. Ekwuru (1999) notes that Nigerian society is characterized by high levels of corruption, materialism, and moral compromise, which exert pressure on Christians to conform. The dominance of prosperity-oriented teachings in some churches has further contributed to the dilution of Christian identity, as believers equate faith with material success rather than with moral transformation (Agha, 2003). Uka (2010) also emphasizes that Nigerian Christians often face identity crises when ethnic loyalties overshadow their commitment to Christ, leading to divisions and rivalries even within the church. This socio-religious context highlights the difficulty of embodying the Pauline notion of the new creation. Instead of “old things” passing away, they often persist in subtle forms, thereby weakening the witness of the church. As such, Nigerian scholars agree that Christian identity must be re-examined in light of these contextual realities to ensure that it reflects the authentic demands of the gospel.

Exegetical and Contextual Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:17

The Second Epistle to the Corinthians is one of Paul’s most personal and complex letters. Written around A.D. 55–57, it reflects the apostle’s strained relationship with the Corinthian church, which had questioned his authority and integrity (Barrett, 1973). The city of Corinth was a cosmopolitan and morally decadent center, marked by commercial prosperity, idolatry, and social divisions (Horsley, 1997). Against this background, Paul wrote to defend his apostleship, reconcile with the community, and reassert the essence of the gospel message. Anizor (2007) notes that the Corinthian context mirrors many African urban settings where material affluence, cultural plurality, and moral compromise challenge the authenticity of Christian witness. Paul’s letter, therefore, is not just a historical document but a theological response to a community grappling with identity and transformation. The literary context of 2 Corinthians 5:17 lies within Paul’s broader discourse on reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:11–21), where he presents the new creation as evidence of divine reconciliation with humanity.

Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:17

The text of 2 Corinthians 5:17 reads: “ὥστε εἴ τις ἐν Χριστῷ, καινὴ κτίσις· τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινὰ” (“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come”).

The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ (“in Christ”) signifies union with Christ, which is the basis of Paul’s theology of transformation (Dunn, 1998). According to Adeyemo (2006), the concept of being “in Christ” is not merely positional but experiential, demanding a radical re-orientation of life. The expression καινὴ κτίσις (“new creation”) indicates a complete transformation of the believer’s identity. The adjective καινός implies newness in quality rather than simply in time, pointing to a renewed existence different in essence from the former state (Fee, 2007).

The verb παρῆλθεν (“has passed away”) denotes decisive action signifying that the old patterns of sin, selfishness, and cultural bondage are decisively terminated. As Osuagwu (2010) emphasizes, Paul’s choice of the perfect tense in γέγονεν καινὰ (“new things have come”) underscores the permanence of this new identity, which is both a present reality and an ongoing process of sanctification. The exegesis thus reveals that Paul envisioned Christian life as a complete transformation rooted in union with Christ and expressed in ethical renewal.

Theological Implications of the Text

Theologically, 2 Corinthians 5:17 emphasizes the radical break between the believer's old life and the new life in Christ. For Wright (2005), the new creation is not merely an individual reality but also an eschatological sign pointing to the renewal of the entire cosmos. In the Nigerian context, Okwueze (1998) argues that this implies that Christians are called not only to personal piety but also to active engagement in transforming their social environment. The doctrine of the new creation also carries implications for ecclesiology and discipleship. As Akintunde (2001) points out, Christian communities must serve as visible manifestations of the new creation, demonstrating love, justice, and holiness. This means that churches in Nigeria cannot accommodate syncretistic practices that contradict biblical ethics. The text also has ethical dimensions: it challenges believers to renounce corruption, tribalism, and materialism, which are pervasive in Nigerian society. Moltmann (1993) further explains that the new creation is a participation in God's future, meaning Christians live in anticipation of the ultimate redemption while embodying its values in the present.

Contextual Application to Nigerian Society

In Nigeria, the relevance of 2 Corinthians 5:17 is particularly evident in the tension between religious profession and moral practice. Ajayi (2009) observes that while church membership continues to grow rapidly, the society is still plagued by corruption, political violence, and moral decadence. Paul's message implies that Christian identity must manifest as genuine transformation rather than external religiosity. Furthermore, Oloyede (2012) emphasizes that Nigerian Christians must resist the tendency to blend biblical faith with unwholesome cultural practices such as ritualism, nepotism, and ethnic chauvinism. The new creation demands a clear demarcation between the life of the believer and the surrounding culture where values contradict the gospel. International scholars like Hays (1996) argue that the new creation entails a redefinition of identity that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, a point that resonates strongly in Nigeria's ethnically divided society. The contextual application, therefore, challenges both individual Christians and church communities to embody authentic transformation. Churches must prioritize discipleship, ethical instruction, and social responsibility as expressions of the new creation. Ultimately, Paul's vision in 2 Corinthians 5:17 remains a powerful theological resource for Nigerian Christianity, calling believers to live as visible witnesses of the reality that "old things have passed away."

Implications for Christian Identity in Nigeria

- **Christian Identity and Moral Transformation:** The foundation of Christian identity is moral transformation. In Paul's theology of the new creation, the believer undergoes a radical change in character, behavior, and orientation to life (Sanders, 1997). Onah (2011) emphasizes that morality is central to Christian identity because it demonstrates the authenticity of one's faith. In a society where corruption and immorality are endemic, the demand of 2 Corinthians 5:17 is that Christians should embody new ethical standards that reflect their union with Christ. Okafor (2014) argues that the moral transformation associated with Christian identity is not merely private but also communal, influencing social relationships and public life. This implies that Christians in Nigeria must reject practices such as bribery, dishonesty, and exploitation, which undermine societal progress. As Stott (1990) observes, the world is more likely to believe the gospel when it is modeled in transformed lives. Thus, moral transformation is both the evidence of new life in Christ and the strategy for renewing Nigerian society.
- **Challenges of Nominalism and Syncretism:** Despite the emphasis on transformation, Nigerian Christianity faces the persistent challenges of nominalism and syncretism. Nominalism refers to the practice of identifying as Christian without demonstrating genuine discipleship. As Eneh (2009) notes, church pews are filled with members who profess Christ but whose lives remain unchanged, thereby creating a gap between faith and practice. This nominalist tendency reduces Christianity to a cultural identity rather than a lived experience. Syncretism further complicates Christian identity. Ayegboyin and Ishola (1999) describe syncretism as the blending of Christian faith with indigenous religious practices,

leading to diluted expressions of the gospel. In Nigeria, this is evident in practices such as reliance on charms, oath-taking, and ritual sacrifices among individuals who also identify as Christians. Gifford (2004) observes that African Christianity sometimes becomes pragmatic, adopting elements of the surrounding culture to meet immediate needs rather than faithfully preserving biblical truth. Both nominalism and syncretism undermine the authenticity of Christian witness in Nigeria, making the call to “new creation” urgent and necessary.

- **Impact on Social and Ethical Life:** The implications of Christian identity go beyond personal morality; they extend into broader social and ethical life. Nmah (2010) highlights that authentic Christianity should foster justice, equity, and peace in society. If Christians embody their new identity, they will contribute positively to governance, education, business, and family life. However, the lack of a consistent Christian witness has weakened the church’s ability to influence Nigerian society effectively. Bonhoeffer (1959) contends that true discipleship requires public responsibility, where believers live out their faith in ways that transform their context. For Nigerian society, this means that Christians must challenge structural injustice, corruption, and ethnic divisions by embodying the values of the kingdom of God. Oguejiofor (2011) adds that Christian identity is incomplete if it does not engage societal realities, since faith without social ethics degenerates into empty religiosity. Thus, the transformation of society depends largely on how Christians allow their identity in Christ to shape their ethical engagement in the public sphere.
- **Role of the Church in Shaping Identity:** The church plays a vital role in nurturing and sustaining Christian identity. According to Mbiti (1990), the church in Africa serves not only as a place of worship but also as a community of formation where values and ethics are transmitted. In Nigeria, Okwueze (2002) stresses that the church must prioritize discipleship, emphasizing teaching and mentoring as pathways to moral transformation. Without intentional discipleship, many Christians remain shallow in faith and vulnerable to cultural compromise. Furthermore, Walls (1996) argues that the church in Africa has the responsibility of contextualizing the gospel without compromising its essence. This means that Nigerian churches should critically evaluate cultural practices, adopting those that align with the gospel and rejecting those that conflict with biblical teaching. Ene (2015) also suggests that churches should strengthen their social responsibility by addressing issues such as poverty, unemployment, and injustice, thereby embodying the new creation in practical ways. Therefore, the role of the church is indispensable in shaping Christian identity. It is through sound teaching, discipleship, and ethical leadership that Nigerian Christians can live out the reality of 2 Corinthians 5:17, becoming true witnesses of transformation in a society yearning for renewal.

Conclusion

This study on “Old Things Have Passed Away: A Contextual Analysis of 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Its Implications for Christian Identity in Nigerian Society” has demonstrated that the Pauline concept of the “new creation” is both exegetically profound and practically relevant. The exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:17 revealed that Paul’s emphasis on transformation, encapsulated in the Greek term *kainē ktisis*, is not merely a theological abstraction but a lived reality that defines Christian identity. The believer is not only reconciled to God but also called to embody newness in character, moral conduct, and social engagement. The Nigerian socio-religious context, however, presents peculiar challenges to this identity formation. Nominalism, syncretism, materialism, and the persistence of cultural values that contradict biblical principles have often hindered Christians from fully living out the implications of their new creation status. Yet, the findings of this study affirm that genuine Christian identity cannot be divorced from moral transformation, ethical responsibility, and active participation in building a just and peaceful society. Furthermore, the role of the church in shaping identity remains critical. By offering sound teaching, mentoring, and intentional discipleship, the church can become a transformative agent that empowers believers to live distinctively as new creations. Thus, the Pauline message to the Corinthians speaks with renewed urgency to Nigerian Christians today: to put away old patterns of life and embrace the radical newness of life in Christ. In doing so, Christians in Nigeria will not only affirm their identity in Christ but also contribute meaningfully to the healing and renewal of society.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthening Discipleship and Teaching in the Church:** The Nigerian church should prioritize intentional discipleship programs that emphasize both the theological and practical dimensions of the “new creation” in Christ. Regular Bible studies, small group mentorship, and character-focused teachings will help believers internalize 2 Corinthians 5:17 and translate it into moral transformation and ethical living. This will counter nominalism and ensure that Christian identity is not reduced to church attendance but is expressed in daily conduct.
- 2. Contextual Christian Engagement with Society:** Christians in Nigeria should be encouraged to demonstrate their identity in Christ through active participation in addressing societal ills such as corruption, injustice, and moral decay. By embodying newness in social and professional spheres, believers can serve as agents of transformation. The church should also encourage contextual theology that speaks directly to Nigerian realities, thereby enabling Christians to confront syncretism and materialism with biblical truth while affirming cultural values that align with the gospel.

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