

# AN AFRICAN CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE OF DEATH

BY

OFFIONG OFFIONG ASUQUO, M.A.

## Abstract

Death is the end or absence of life; it also refers to the end of a thing or an event. It is a common phenomenon, which is unavoidable. Africans, like other people are interested in it, and they view and treat it from their cultural perspectives. However, those Africans who are converted to Christianity face a sort of dilemma in that Christianity came with its own views and teachings on death, along with a mixture of the cultures and backgrounds of the missionaries who brought it, whereas the Africans already had their own views. This paper attempts to examine death both from the Christian and African perspectives with particular emphasis on the Efik people of Nigeria, then it attempts to synthesize both positions in an attempt to formulate an African Christian Theology on Death which is avoid of foreign cultural influence and is not contrary to the Bible. In order to achieve this, constant references are made to the Bible and African views on various aspects of death such as its meaning, causes, types, purposes, and the Afterlife.

## Meaning of Death

**Christian View: Meaning of Death** According to the Christian perspective, death is the general appointment for sinful man and it involves the separation of the soul from the body. Heb. 9:27; Rom. 5:14 (Bible Dictionary 207). Helmut Thielicke adds that death goes beyond the end of physical life to include guilt and punishment (110). He cites examples of Paul's statement in Rom. 6:23 which says that "the wages of sin is death"..., and in Psalms 90 which speaks about the wrath of God under which man's days vanish. According to this position, death is the result of man's sin, it is punishment for man's sins and separates the dead unbelievers from God eternally (110).

J. D. Douglas et al, further add that from one viewpoint, death is a natural phenomenon according to: Heb. 9:27 - "It. is appointed for men to die once". While from another viewpoint it is unnatural and it is a penalty for sin according to Rom. 6:23. The fact that Adam did not die physically on the day he disobeyed God, means that death which is said to be the result of sin, is .more than bodily death.. It is something that involves the whole man, physically and spiritually. There is no sharp demarcation between the two in the Bible. Physical death is a symbol of, an expression of and a link with the spiritual death which sin brings (374). From the foregoing therefore, the Christian position sees death both as the end of the physical life and also as a punishment of the soul of the dead impenitent sinner who will be eternally separated from God.

## African View: Meaning of Death

According to Idowu, the common Yoruba belief is that death is a creation of Olodumare the creator, he was made for the purpose of recalling any person whose time on earth is fulfilled.- Thus death is the inevitable lot of every person who comes into the world (187). Mbiti sees death as a process, which removes a person gradually from the 'Sasa' period to the 'Zamani' The Sasa period means the time of physical existence on earth and the period after death within which the departed is remembered by relatives and friends who knew him. When the last of these survivors die off, the departed now enters the 'Zamani' which is complete death (25).

An analysis of the above views shows that Mbiti agrees with Idowu over the inevitability of death which is a common African position, they also agree that death removes people from the world after a specific time, Idowu emphasizes the role of Olodumare as the originator of death, while Mbiti highlights death as an event that must occur as time moves on.

Opoku throws more light by stating that death is not the end of life, but a transition from this world to the land of the spirits. Death does not sever family connection, but the dead become ancestors (133).

A random sampling and study of some Efiks in Cross River State of Nigeria, revealed that they generally believe that death involves an end of the physical life and a departure of the soul and spirit from the body (Field Questionnaire). This view of death among the Efiks, is also confirmed by Rosalind J. Hackett in her work "Religion in Calabar" (40).

From the foregoing, a picture of the African view of death can be painted as follows: Death is a creation of God, made for the purpose of removing people from the earth when their time is up (Idowu, 187). It happens gradually, starting from the time of one's departure from the earth physically, to the time I when the last person who knew him physically dies off (Mbiti, 25). Death is a transition or movement which involves transformation from the physical into the spiritual as the dead continue to live as ancestors (Opoku, 133).

This paper will now attempt to synthesize the two positions on death in order to construct an African Christian view of death. 1.3 A Synthesis: An African Christian View A synthesis of both Christian and African views on the meaning of death, shows that they both agree that death is unavoidable and inevitable for man, and it originates from a source that is greater than man - God. Both also agree that death is a transition, a movement with a transformation from the physical realm into the spiritual realm. It is not the end of life because man continues to exist in the spiritual realm after leaving this world. The foregoing should be the position of the African Christian on the meaning of death.

## **Causes of Death**

### **Christian View on Causes of Death**

From the Christian position, the main cause of death according to the Bible is the disobedience by Adam and Eve, the first couple, of God's command that they should not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil or else they will die (Gen. 2:15-17; 3:6).

*"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19).*

This sentence of death is believed to have passed on to all persons by virtue of their being descendants of Adam and Eve. This is confirmed in Romans 5:12.

*"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned"*

Due to the advent of death, the issue of the time of death came up next and man then had a time of death as stated in Ecclesiastes 3:2

*"A time to be born and a time to die" The concept of sin as the main cause of death is further confirmed in Rom. 6:23*

*"For the wages of sin is death..."*

Here the sin appears to include the sin committed by the first man and the inherited sinful nature of other men, 'while the death here includes both the physical and spiritual death.

### **African View on Causes of Death**

For the African, death is regarded as a compulsory stage in the journey of life, and it is a transition from this world to the land of the spirits (Opoku, 133). According to Mbiti, most Africans have mythological explanations of how death first came into the world (155). He summarizes that from these myths, it appears that God withdrew from men partly because of man's disobedience to Him, partly through accident caused by men and partly through the severing of the link between heaven and earth. This separation brought death and other tragic effects to man (98).

The above explanation attempts to account for the origin of evil and death into the world in the first place, it could be viewed as the long-term cause of death. Many Africans however believe that there are also specific and short term causes of death, which may be sorcery and witchcraft (Awolalu, and Dopamu, 255). It could also be used by the breaking of taboos or oaths by the deceased or a relation (Awolalu and Dopamu, 255).

The Efiks generally believe that death is the inevitable end of man. They accept that premature and bad deaths are mostly caused by enemies or by the breaking of taboos and laws (Field Questionnaire).

### **A Synthesis: An African Christian View**

A synthesis of the Christian and African views on the causes of death will show that both agree that death is the result of the violation of some laws or taboos. In the Christian view, the taboo was the command of God to Adam in Eden, while in the African position, it could be the violation of some traditional taboos, laws, or an offence against a person or a deity.

Among the Efiks, most untimely deaths are often attributed to enemies and evil powers. From the points above, it can be postulated that the African Christian will generally agree that death is caused by man's sin, and it is an inevitable end. It ought to come at a ripe old age after the completion of one's duties on earth. Premature, untimely and other forms of bad deaths like drowning or poisoning are attributed to enemies or evil powers. He will also accept that death could be caused by the violation of traditional laws or taboos by the victims.

### **Types of Death**

#### **Christian View: Types of Death**

Several types of death can be observed from the Christian Biblical viewpoint. Firstly, there is the physical death which is the inevitable fate of everyone, whether Christian or not. This is reflected in Psalms 90; 10.

*"The years of our life are threescore and ten or even by reason of strength; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone and we flyaway"*

This physical death is further divided into the 'death of saints' which is precious in God's sight according to Psalms 116:15; and the death of the wicked which is displeasing to God. Ezekiel 18:23

Secondly, there is the spiritual death which is a state of being detached from or separated from God (Douglas et al, 375). The spiritual death has been biblically analyzed and described in various ways according to Douglas et al, it is seen both as an event according to Romans 8:6 which says "To set the: the mind on the flesh is death. .." and as a state of being according to (John 3: 14 which says that "He who does not love, abides in death" (375).

It is also seen as a penalty for sin in Romans 6:23 and the final state of the impenitent man according to Rev. 20:14-15.

### **African View: Types of Death**

According to Awolalu and Dopamu, Africans categorize deaths into good and bad deaths. Bad deaths include deaths of children, those caused by gods due to the offences of the victims, others are those caused by leprosy, accidents, pregnancy, deaths of lunatics, suicide and those who have been murdered, burned or drowned (254).

Good death is that which comes when one lives to a ripe old age. There are occasions when the death of a young person is not considered totally bad. Such a person must have lived a good life, and must have left behind some survivors (Awolalu and Dopamu, 245-255).

These views are observable among the Efiks who generally classify death into natural death at old age which is good, and bad deaths like pre-mature deaths, suicide, and death caused by enemies, accidents or breaking of taboos (Field Questionnaire).

### **A Synthesis: An African Christian View**

This shows that both the Christian and African positions agree that there are good and bad deaths, acceptable and unacceptable deaths. For the Christian, the good death is that of a believer who dies in the faith, whereas for the African, good death is that which comes naturally at a ripe old age.

Secondly, for the Christian, the bad death is that of the wicked or unbeliever, whereas for the African, bad death includes premature deaths and other forms of disgraceful deaths listed above.

A synthesis of the above views will mean that the African Christian will tend to regard the good death as that of a Christian at a ripe old age through natural means after a good life, and he must have left behind some survivors. Whereas he; will regard as bad deaths, all pre-mature deaths whether of Christians or not. In addition, deaths through suicide, breaking of taboos, deaths by enemies, accidents or terrible diseases, irrespective of age, are also regarded as bad deaths.

The typical African Christian cannot accept or apply the lesson in Rom. 8:28 that everything works 'for good, to the issue of bad death. It is hard, if not impossible for him to see anything good in bad deaths.

### **Purpose of Death**

#### **Christian View: Purpose of Death**

Physical death and mortality are accepted to be due to Adam's sin, the penalty includes both physical and spiritual aspects. Physical death is a symbol of, an expression of, and a link with the spiritual death which sin brings (Douglas et al, ed. 374). However, at the same time, this physical death for believers, is seen as a transition, a home call to rest after the completion of their work on earth (Rev. 14:13).

*"And I heard a voice from heaven saying, write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth 'Blessed indeed' says the Spirit 'That they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them'"*

It is a precursor to eternal life in the spiritual world as confirmed in I Corinthians 15:44 that the dead is sown as a physical body and will be raised as a spiritual body.

### **African View: Purpose of Death.**

According to Idowu, death is made for the purpose of recalling anyone whose time on earth is fulfilled (187). It is a means of transiting from this life to the spiritual world, and it enables one to become an ancestor (Opoku: 133).

The ancestors play important roles, which include to protect, direct, intervene and guide their families, and to serve as elders of the family (Opoku 134). Death enhances these roles by enabling one to become an ancestor. On the other hand, death is also regarded as a wicked destroyer, a killer and a curse which frustrates human effort. It brings about physical separation and loss, and drives men to sorrow (Opoku 134). In this context it could be seen as a punishment for offences or the violation of taboos.

The Efiks generally agree with Idowu and Opoku's views on the purpose of death because they believe that death is God's agent for removing people from the world, it enables one to join the ancestors, but it is an enemy which takes away lives. Some of them see death as nature's way of regulating the population by balancing with the birth rate.

### **A Synthesis: An African Christian View**

Both the Bible and African views agree that death is a means of leaving this world to the spiritual world, they also agree that death is the inevitable end of man, a sort of punishment, which is brought about by man's sins. Both positions agree that death is undesirable, a destroyer and a curse, which frustrates and causes sorrow.

Hence, the African Christian position will tend to see the purpose of death as a compulsory way of leaving this world to paradise. He will also agree that even though physical death is a punishment for sin, yet it is a door into eternal rest for the Christian. Whereas he will regard spiritual death as the final state of the impenitent person after death, and that is eternal separation from God.

### **The Afterlife**

#### **Christian View: The Afterlife**

In the Christian view, the afterlife significantly starts with the resurrection. This is divided into two, the resurrection of believers and that of unbelievers as shown in Daniel 12:2 thus:

*"Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt"*

This means that all the dead whether Christians or not, are sleeping, and that the Christians will resurrect first at the second coming of Christ according to (I Thess. 4:16-17). This resurrection will usher them into eternal life with God in paradise, whereas later on the impenitent dead will resurrect to face the white throne judgment which will culminate in their being thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15).

Eternal life for the Christians, is a life of bliss. In that state, there is no more evil, night, or problems. This picture is painted in (Rev. 21:2-4).

#### **African View; the Afterlife**

Many Africans believe that the dead go to the land of the spirits or ancestors which is underground. However, some do not visualize any physical or geographical separation between

the physical and spiritual world as they believe that the dead simply arrives there in this spirit form (Mbiti 160).

Opoku adds that in the afterlife, the dead are not cut off from the living, they may reveal themselves in dreams or appear to their living relatives to give instructions, warnings or information. They may summon living relatives to appear before them to explain their misconduct, and may punish them (137). However, those who died bad deaths and those who lived bad lives, cannot become ancestors, they are regarded as evil ghosts. The dead are also believed to be able to return to the earth to be reborn into their families. This is shown by some of the name given to children. For instance, 'lyabo' in Yoruba, means mother returns (Opoku, 138).

However, some Africans believe that the departed return to their creator and the final destiny of man depends on the way he lived on earth. God is believed to mete out judgment to men after their death, and each has to give account of his earthly life (Opoku, 139).

Efiks generally accept that the dead go to the land of the dead called 'Obio Ekpo' which is underground. The good ones become useful ancestors. Some Efiks strongly believe in reincarnation of the dead and claim to have seen evidences like birthmarks and other traits (Field QuestioQnaire).

### **A Synthesis: An African Christian View**

A synthesis of both positions on the Afterlife will reveal that both agree that there is life after physical death. For the Christian, this starts after the resurrection at the second coming of Christ. Both agree that the quality of one's life over there will depend on how he lived and died on earth. Christians who die in the Lord will rise into eternal bliss and joy, while unbelievers will rise to face eternal punishment.

Similarly, from the African position, those who lived good lives and died good deaths on earth, become ancestors who are useful to their people and are often consulted, whereas those who lived and died badly, cannot become ancestors.

Opoku's comments that some Africans hold that the final destiny of man depends on the way he lived on earth, and that God is believed to mete out judgment to men after their death, and each has to give account of his earthly life (139), strongly agrees with the Christian view on afterlife. From the foregoing, an African Christian view of the Afterlife will accept that the dead Christians are sleeping, but will rise when Christ comes (I Thess. 4:16-17) and shall be with God for ever in eternal bliss.

It will also accept that the dead Christians will be rewarded by God for their work while on earth (2 Cor. 5:10), on the other hand the impenitent dead will resurrect to face eternal punishment in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15, Dan. 12:2).

### **Summary And Conclusion**

This paper has attempted to examine the phenomenon of death under the following aspects, the meaning, causes, types, purpose and the Afterlife. Each of these has been analyzed both from the Biblical Christian view and African viewpoint, with particular reference to the Efiks of Nigeria. In the process, an attempt has been made to synthesize similar aspects of both views in an effort to formulate an African Christian theology on death.

The summary of the synthesis is as follows: For the African Christian, death is the inevitable end of man which originates from a source greater than man-God. It is a transition with transformation from this world into the spiritual world.

On the causes of death, he agrees that death is the result of man's sin against God, but it should come at a ripe old age after completing one's tasks on earth. Other forms of death are attributed to evil forces or enemies. He also believes that death could be caused by the violation of traditional taboos.

On the types of death, the African Christian accepts that there are good and bad deaths; for him the good death is the death of a Christian at a ripe old age through natural process after a good life, and he must have left behind some survivors. Whereas he regards as bad deaths, ail premature deaths, whether of believers or not. In addition, deaths through suicide, breaking of taboos, deaths by enemies, deaths by accidents or terrible diseases irrespective of age, are also regarded as bad deaths.

On the purpose of death, the African Christian tends to see it as a compulsory way of leaving this world to paradise or a place of rest. He also, accepts physical death as a consequence or punishment for sin and offences, and spiritual death (Eternal separation from God), as the final state of the impenitent person.

On the afterlife, the African Christian accepts that the dead in Christ, are sleeping or resting, but they will rise at the second coming of Christ according to I Thess. 4: 1 6-1 7, and shall be with God forever in eternal bliss.

He also accepts that such believers will also be rewarded by God for their work while on earth according to 2 Cor. 5: 10, whereas unbelievers who die, will resurrect to face eternal punishment in the lake of fire according to Rev. 20: 14-15, Dan. 1 2:2.

In the process of formulating an African Christian view of death, this paper has adopted a method of synthesizing similar aspects of both African and Christian views on death, on an equal level. Neither is made to be superior to the other, both are treated equally and merged together, whereas dissimilar aspects such as re-incarnation which are not part of Christianity are excluded. In addition, aspects of foreign culture or belief on death which are unbiblical are expunged, but at the same time care is taken not to contradict or deviate from the basic Bible and Christian teaching on death.

It is hoped that this approach could help other scholars to formulate an appropriate African Christian Theology on any issue.

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