

**A DISCUSSION OF JAMES 1: 27 AND ITS IMPACT ON EFFORTS IN
EVANGELIZATION AND DISCIPLESHIP IN THE GHANAIAN
CHRISTIAN CONTEXT**

Daniel Dei

Valley View University

Oyibi-Ghana

deidaniel@yahoo.com or dei.daniel@vvu.edu.gh

+233-24-047879 & +233-504321040

Abstract

This article addresses the issue of true Christianity in the Ghanaian context – that is the kind of Christianity that meets all the requirements of God. It is essentially a theological reflection on the passage in James 1: 27. By this approach, the article brings out the core concern of the passage and applies it theologically to the Ghanaian context. The article concludes on the notion that the characteristics of true Christianity in the Ghanaian context offers an answer to the fundamental question underlining the general Ghanaian way of life: what does it mean to be a human being? To this end, true Christianity is characterised by mutual respect for all human beings, generosity towards all, liberation, and genuineness. Interestingly, these ideals or values are best expressed in the Ghanaian context in the important concepts of humanity and brotherhood or sisterhood of all human beings. Through the expression of faith in God, the Father, and expressed altruistic Christian attitude in the Ghanaian context, then, Christian missionaries and denominations may possess an effective tool for evangelization and nurturing.

Keywords: *Religion/Christianity, Evangelization, Humanity, Brotherhood/sisterhood, Common good*

Introduction

Christianity, one of the world religions, is often thought of as “the faith tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ.”¹ It is not just another kind of philosophy. Rather, it is a system of worship that centres on the personality of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the Bible calls on adherents to constantly focus on Him in everything they may do (1 Cor 10:31). In this sense, therefore, the true Christian could be seen as one who unflinchingly follows Jesus Christ; believes Him, worships Him, and tries to live as He did. This implies that the one who is referred to as a true Christian ought to be seen ‘doing well’ in focusing on the person of Jesus Christ. Howbeit, the notion of ‘true Christianity’ means different things to different people.

In defining what true Christianity means, several people have offered varying statements. For example, Houdmann² states that an acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's personal Saviour, trust in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, an indwelling of the Spirit of God as well as a practical life representative of the faith of Jesus Christ are the elements that describes the identity of a true

Christian. Meredith³ adds that the true Christian is the one who daily yields his or her thoughts, time, energy, and even life to Jesus Christ and accepts His leadership.

Though both statements are stirring, they are nonetheless, inadequate. While they all stress aspects regarding the 'believing and worshipping of Jesus,' both give faint practical illumination as to the connection between true Christianity and desiring to live as Jesus Christ did. This inadequacy calls into focus Spring's ideas on the matter. In his book, *The distinguishing traits of Christian character*⁴ he mentions seven (7) things that should not be taken as conclusive evidence that someone is a genuine or false Christian. These things are visible morality, head knowledge, a form of religion, eminent gifts, conviction for sin, strong assurance, and notable time or manner of one's professed conversion. Visible morality describes a situation where an individual is able to make good moral choices and behaves in a manner that is consistent with Christian virtues. A person who possesses theological knowledge of God alone may be said to have head knowledge of Christianity. Individuals who follow the beliefs and practices of their religious profession faithfully may be said to have a form of religion. In 2 Tim 3: 5, the Apostle Paul terms it "form of godliness." Those who possess extraordinary gifts and talents such as wisdom, knowledge, faith, miraculous healings, prophecy, tongues, serving, teaching, mercy, and leadership (1 Cor 12:8-10; Rom 12:6-8) necessary for the survival of the Christian Church may be said to have eminent gifts. Individuals who have mentally forsaken their old non-Christian life and accepted the new life in Christ (Isa 55:7; Acts 2:38) could be described as those who have had conviction for sin. Those who have strong feelings of confidence in the Christian faith and are certain that they belong together may identify with strong assurance. Individuals who have spent longer years as Christians could be described as Christians who have professed Christianity for notable years. Though these seven (7) factors are essential to Christian faith and practice, they are nonetheless not conclusive. A Christian may possess all these traits and yet possibly be in the "gall of bitterness, and bonds of sin."⁵ For this reason, Walker⁶ recommends that Christians need to identify such inconclusive markers of true Christianity. By this means, Christians may escape the "tyranny of mere subjectivism...flawed and rotten supports" that have long characterized the false foundation of true Christian faith and practice.

This makes the definition of true Christianity difficult. This is because any incautious attempt may generate into subjectivism. Such subjectivism seems to be the main problem with that given by Ndyabahika.⁷ He extends the description of true Christianity to all who contend for the Christian faith. Yet the significance of such definition cannot be overemphasized. Particularly, in Africa, where Christianity is growing rapidly, such knowledge as to what constitutes true Christianity could enhance evangelization and discipleship? In light of this, it could be asked: how may the Christian in Ghana practically understand the meaning of true Christianity?

This paper has been composed in an attempt to elucidate what constitutes true Christianity in the Ghanaian context. It briefly reviews the history of Christianity in Ghana. This is followed by a theological understanding of true Christianity in the context of James 1: 27, a discussion of James 1: 27 in the Ghanaian context and its implications for efforts in evangelization and discipleship? Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations.

A Brief history of Christianity in Ghana

The history of Christianity in Ghana began with the earliest contact between Europeans and indigenous Ghanaians. It has been variously said that such contact took place in the 15th century during the Portuguese explorations.⁸ Among these explorers, Odamtten⁹ has identified some Roman Catholics who were charged by Papal Bull to create "Holy faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" among the people they encounter. On arrival, however, Sackey¹⁰ observes that "they were enchanted by immense deposits of gold wealth." It appears that their desire of these clerics to trade in this gold discovery soon diverted their attention from the course of evangelization.

In the 16th century, attempts were made to revamp methods of Christianizing Ghanaians. This move was largely led by Portuguese Augustinian and French Capuchin monks in Elmina. However, the reality of the slave trade, which was as a result of the Dutch conquest in 1637, frustrated these new attempts.¹¹ Later, new methods of evangelizing Ghanaian indigenes were adopted by the Dutch Moravians in 1742. This attempt was followed by Church of England's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1751. Yet such results were almost fruitless. Amanor¹² notes that Christianity had little traces in the Gold Coast in the 18th century. Nilsson¹³ considers the earlier efforts of the Europeans on the missionary front as unproductive.

It was the efforts of the Basel Missionaries in 1828 that was greeted with much success. As it were, their efforts gave renewed impetus to the work of Christianising the indigenes. Little wonder that one of the first Christian churches to be established in the Gold Coast (now Ghana) was the Presbyterian Church of Ghana¹⁴. Similar successes resulted from other missionary efforts by different Christian denominations. Notable among these were the Wesleyan Methodist, who began their work of evangelization in 1834, and the Bremen Mission (Evangelical Presbyterian Church) in 1847. Later in 1880, the Roman Catholic missionaries staged another comeback. Unlike the results of earlier attempts, they were successful this time. Probably, the abolition of the slave trade was a major factor that determined the success of evangelization this time.

It should be noted that all these missionary efforts were scattered across the length and breadth of the territory of the then Gold Coast (now Ghana). The Basel Missionaries concentrated their missionary activities in Akropong. From this point, they moved eventually to cover what is now the Eastern Region of Ghana. The Wesleyan Methodist, on the other hand, focused their missionary

activities in the coastal regions and from there reached out to other coastal populace in other regions in the territory (Central and Greater Accra Regions). Further, the Bremen Missionaries centered on the Volta Region of the territory in their evangelization activities. Finally, the Roman Catholic missionaries focused on the northern part of the country, competing with Islam, which had this time spread and taken roots in that part of the country.

The results of the combined efforts of these Christian missionaries have been immeasurably significant. They have impacted the indigenous Ghanaian in every aspect of his or her life—from mannerisms through thoughts and style of speaking and dressing. These efforts, according to Amanor,¹⁵ have resulted in the demography of Ghana being "predominantly Christian." Nilsson¹⁶ adds that "Ghana's ethos is recognizably Christian." True to this observation, the number of Christians in Ghana has increased through the years. From 52.65% of the population in 1970, 75.6% in 1998/99, it fell to 69% in 2000¹⁷ but rose to 71.2% in 2010.¹⁸

Factors that have contributed to the growth of Christianity in Ghana

By far, the singular factor that has contributed to the spread of Christianity in Ghana is evangelization. Evangelization as defined by Lineamenta,¹⁹ "is the process of bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new." Sackey adds that the evidence of it must be holistic – reflected through converts' "lifestyle, "conduct," "relationships," and "interactions" with creation.²⁰ Hence, the author takes Christian evangelization to mean the process of bringing the Christian message of Good News or hope to persons or groups who may be ignorant of it and influencing their thought, behavior, and affective patterns in a manner that they can resolve the challenging or existential questions in their socio-cultural and spirit-moral environment. Viewed this way, evangelization becomes a tool in the hands of the Christian for providing a worldview that answers the existential questions of life to a given group of people. For this reason, effective Christian evangelization should seek to apply the fundamental principles of the Christian faith to the culture and needs of the group or individuals it targets. By this statement, I agree with Walls²¹ on his notion that Christianity must make itself at home with the cultural context, associating Christians with the particulars of their culture and group.

In this direction, it could be seen that the methods of evangelization employed in the then Gold Coast were influenced by Pietism. From the German *Pietismus*, Pietism is an "influential religious reform movement that began among German Lutherans in the 17th century...concerned with social and educational matters."²² According to Amanor,²³ one of the core beliefs of Pietism is the belief "in the inherent goodness of all people regardless of race." Such inherent goodness needed to be nurtured through "educational efforts."²⁴ As a result, the

missionaries engaged in other activities such as providing education, health and socio-economic empowerment to the indigenes they came in contact with.

Concerning education, the missionaries built schools and chapels together. In these schools, they trained young Ghanaian indigenes. Among them, excellent students were sent abroad for further studies. Amanor²⁵ has intimated that this move paid off considering the fact that most indigenous leaders on the continent, and particularly in Ghana, were products of this effort. In the area of healthcare, the doctors of the missionaries sent from Europe saw the need of improving upon the healthcare system of the indigenes. This led to the establishment of mission hospitals, clinics and health centers in the country. Observably, these hospitals are still pivotal in the Ghanaian healthcare delivery system.²⁶ Another major missionary activity was realized in the area of socio-economic empowerment. Here, the missionaries sought ways by which they could impact their converts in a manner that could improve their general lifestyles. In other words, they sought to create “an independent” middle class. For this reason, they introduced their converts to large-scale farming and commerce.

Though the main aim of the missionaries was to spread Christianity in the then Gold Coast, they ended up improving the general lifestyles of the indigenes. The missionary activities in the area of education, healthcare, and socio-economic empowerment led to a general socio-economic betterment for the indigenous population. To this extent, the author believes the western missionaries were wholly successful. They successfully balanced pure doctrines with practice. This was revealed in their general concern for improving the lives of their converts, as suggested James 1: 27.

Theological Understanding of James 1: 27

In this biblical passage, James²⁷ concerns himself with a description of true Christianity. Since the noun form of the Greek *theskos* (ritualism), religion, generally meant ‘fearing or worshipping God’ and the Greek verb *theskeia* primarily means “fear of the gods; religious worship, especially external, that which consists in ceremonies”,²⁸ it seems probable that the immediate recipients of James’ letter were Jewish Christians who appear to have generally understood true Christianity to be the performance of rituals and ceremonies only. The Pharisees, for example, “relied on the forms of ritual righteousness to keep themselves undefiled, but they were full of moral defilement within...”²⁹ Adeyemo³⁰ is of the view that James addresses Christians who fail to realistically apply the faith and practice of Christianity. According to him, “Without action, good doctrine is useless. Pure religion shows itself in behavior.” Similarly, Harmon³¹ writes “...without mercy, religion is vain.”

By observing ceremonies and rituals, doctrines were put into action, yet James’ notion of pure Christianity or religion seems to be somewhat different. Noting this uniqueness, Spence and Exell³² have correctly brought out James’

main concern in the passage. According to them, James seems to be saying that true Christianity does not only consist of "outward illustrations or ceremonial observances." Rather, true Christianity consists of an unflinching devotion to God which is expressed in genuine concern for the general well-being of people. In this vein, one may consider outward evidence (of Christianity) a necessary accompaniment of "true heart experience."³³ Certainly, James' idea of true Christianity is not to be understood in a vacuum. Like the prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus Christ, James points out that true Christianity is composed of "a simple and sincere devotion to God" expressed through "compassionate relationship" with one's neighbours.³⁴

Thus in this one-verse biblical passage, James sets the tone for true Christianity as far as motive and standards are concerned. By dwelling on the expression 'God and the Father' in the passage, James suggests that what God accepts must be true Christianity. In this way, true Christianity is not that defined or described by tradition, culture, or philosophy. Rather, it is that which directs Christians to conduct their behaviors in a manner that would acquire God's "approbation."³⁵

By seeking to please God in all that we do, our motives for doing what even appears good is known. To this end, Nichol³⁶ posits that human actions done with "right motives" might qualify as elements of true Christianity. Certainly, the right motive is seen as that which pleases God.³⁷

Therefore, the true Christian acts from a motive that extols God as holy, who must be praised and glorified in the Christian's life. Here, James stresses the essence of knowledge of God. From this internal disposition, then, the Christian is to act in a manner that exerts a positive influence on the life of others. "One's religion, then, should be more than external; it must spring from an inner spiritual reality that expresses itself in love to others and holiness before God."³⁸ This makes true Christianity a life-changing force in the community of faith and beyond. In its life-changing nature, James points out two main ways by which true Christianity is expressed—to visit orphans and widows in their trouble and to keep oneself unspotted from the world. Though there could be other ways to express true Christianity, Harmon³⁹ argues that "compassion toward one's fellows and unworldliness" meets the criteria for defining the elements of true Christianity.

Visiting the orphans and widows means much more than just paying a social call on them. The Greek *episkeptomai*, 'to visit,' entails the idea of looking after.⁴⁰ Noting another appearance of the Greek verb *episkeptomai* in Matthew 25: 36 and 43 (where it means visiting 'orphans and widows' to care for their needs), Gaebelain⁴¹ strongly suggests that *episkeptomai* in the context of James 1: 27 means specifically the care of "orphans and widows." Thus "visiting is here put for all manner of relief which we are capable of giving to others."⁴²

Similarly, Spence and Exell are of the view that James' reference to "orphans and widows" is to be understood as "types of persons in distress; the

‘personae miserabiles’ of the Canon Law.⁴³ This would seem to presuppose that the true Christian, in this regard, should care for all who are needy. This category may include the orphaned, widowed, shut-in, newcomers, lost or unsaved, bedridden, lonely, grieved, and fatherless or motherless.⁴⁴ These are those who are likely to be oppressed in the society.⁴⁵ It should be added that since these persons need the comfort and encouragement of interested friends, such care does not necessarily have to be financial support.⁴⁶

Remaining ‘unspotted from the world’ happens to be another way by which James measures true Christianity. Nichol⁴⁷ suggests that the Greek *aspilon*, unspotted, means “without moral blemish.” Further, he suggests that the term ‘world’ is synonymous with evil principles and practices that are contrary to the will of God.⁴⁸ For Harmon,⁴⁹ ‘worldliness’ is descriptive of anything that opposes the “good will of God.” For this reason, the truly converted Christian must avoid being defiled by acts, thoughts, and feelings that run contrary to God’s will.

In this passage, the concern of James is communicated. True Christianity, for him, is a strong belief in God expressed mainly through compassion and charity to all who are in need of assistance as well as a moral courage to resist temptation and to remain pure in our relationship with God. To this end have Christians been called and they must minister as such. Spence and Exell⁵⁰ sum up James’ main thrust in the passage under study: true Christianity is expressed by means of “personal acts of sympathy and kindness” performed towards the poor and afflicted “out of love” for Jesus. By imbibing elements of true Christianity in their lives, Christians may “promote the social, economic, and educational welfare of the human family” especially for the needy and suffering among them.⁵¹

James 1: 27 and the Indigenous Ghanaian Moral Life

James’ notion that true Christianity consists of strong belief in God expressed in general concern for the well-being of the common good finds fulfillment in the indigenous Ghanaian moral life. Dominantly, the social concepts of humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood appear to be the vehicle by which the Ghanaian idea of the common good is communicated. These two concepts, humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood, feature prominently in the moral thought and practice of Ghanaians. They are among the moral or human values that apparently constitute the basic—perhaps the ultimate—criteria that not only motivate but also justify human actions that affect other human beings.⁵² In Ghanaian terms, humanity is not just an anthropological term; it is also a moral term when it comes to considering the relations between members of the human species. It stresses human welfare, interests, and needs as fundamental.⁵³ Humanity underlines the Ghanaian moral life and thought. Indeed, prayers and other acts of worship are full of requests to the supernatural beings for material comforts, such as prosperity, health, and riches for the wellness of the entire community.

The term ‘brotherhood/sisterhood’ has come to refer generally to an association of men and/or women with mutual aims and interests.⁵⁴ But the notion of brotherhood/sisterhood is essentially a moral notion, for it is about the relations between individual human beings that make for their own interest and well-being. There is some affiliation between humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood in the moral life of the Ghanaian. This association is expressed in the following statement: if we are human, we are (must be) brothers/sisters, in a capacious, comprehensive sense of the word ‘brother/sister.’ A review of some Akan maxims, for example, will undoubtedly depict the significance of these concepts to the general Ghanaian moral life.

First is a maxim that goes like this “humanity has no boundary (*Honam mu nninhanoa*).” The Akan maxim literally means: “In human flesh there is no edge of cultivation—no boundary” (*nhanoa*). The maxim can be interpreted as meaning that “all humankind is one species,” meaning, “humanity has no boundary⁵⁵.” When the farmer cultivates his land, he does it up to a limit, an edge (in Akan: *nhanoa*, edge, boundary) where he has to stop, otherwise he would trespass on another farmer's land. There is, thus, a limit to the area of cultivation of land. By this, the maxim invites us to realize that it is not so in the cultivation of the friendship and fellowship of human beings; the boundaries of *that* form of cultivation are limitless. For, humanity is of one kind; all humankind is one species, with shared basic values, feelings, hopes, and desires. The common membership of one universal human family, therefore, constitutes (should constitute) a legitimate basis for the idea of universal human brotherhood/sisterhood (or unity). By seeking others’ welfare, one enhances life.

Another maxim that emphasizes the same moral notion is that ‘a human being's brother is a (or another) human being (*Onipanua ne onipa*).’ The maxim asserts unmistakably that a human being can be related *only* to another human being, *not* to a beast.⁵⁶ Implicit in the Akan perception of humanity is the recognition of all persons, irrespective of their racial or ethnic backgrounds, as brothers and sisters. This is the reason why in the Akan cultural heritage the word ‘brother/sister’ is used to cover various and complex family relationships linked by blood ties. But the word is also used, significantly, by persons between whom there are no blood ties; thus, the word is used comprehensively. The comprehensive meaning given to the word ‘brother/sister’ in the Akan culture seems to have the intention to lift people up from the purely biologically determined blood relation level onto the human level—the level where the essence of humanity is held as transcending the contingencies of human biology, race, ethnicity, or culture. A practical translation of the idea of brotherhood/sisterhood could lead to such social and moral virtues as hospitality, generosity, concern for others, and communal feeling—virtues commended by many scholars.⁵⁷

It is worth noting that these virtues of humanity and the brotherhood/sisterhood find a deeper expression in the notion of the common

good so foundational to the Ghanaian traditional moral life. In Akan moral thought, for example, the notion is expressed most vividly in an art motif that shows a 'Siamese crocodile' with two heads but a single (that is, common) stomach. The part of the motif relevant to moral thought is the single stomach, and it is to the significance of this that attracts some attention. The common stomach of the two crocodiles generally indicates that at least the basic interests of all the members of the community are identical. It can therefore be interpreted as symbolizing the *common good*, the good of all the individuals within a society.⁵⁸

The *common good* is not a substitute for the sum of the various individual goods. It does not consist of, or derive from, the goods and preferences of particular individuals. It is that which is essentially good for human beings as such, embracing the needs that are *basic* to the enjoyment and fulfillment of the life of each individual. If the *common good* were the aggregate of individual goods, it would only be contingently, not essentially, common and, on that score, it would not be achieved in a manner that will be beneficial to all the individuals in a society. If the *common good* is achieved, then the individual good is also achieved. Perhaps, this explains why the statement 'I am, because you are, and you are because I am' is common in Africa.

Thus, there should be no conceptual tension or opposition between the common good and the good of the individual member of the community, for the *common good* embraces the goods—the basic goods—of all the members of the community. If the *common good* were understood as the basic good—as human good—as such, there would be no need to think of it as a threat to individual liberty as opposed to Western liberal (individualistic) ideologies. For, after all, individual liberty is held as one of the basic goods of the members of the society. The contents of the common stomach, in the symbolic art of the 'Siamese crocodile,' would, therefore, not conflict with the interests and needs of either of the crocodiles.

This *good* includes peace, happiness or satisfaction (human flourishing), justice, dignity, respect, and so on. The common good embraces these goods and more. Such *good* seems to be defined on the premise that there is no human being in Ghana who does not desire peace, security, freedom, dignity, respect, justice, equality, and satisfaction. It is such a moral, not a weird, notion embracive of fundamental goods—goods that are intrinsic to human fulfillment and survival to which all individuals desire to have access—that is referred to as the common good. The unrelenting support by people in a community for such moral values as social justice and equality on the one hand, and the spontaneous, universal denunciation of acts such as murder and cruelty on the other hand, are certainly inspired by beliefs in the common good. It is, thus, pretty clear that the common good is that which inspires the creation of a moral, social, political, or legal system for enhancing the well-being of people in the Ghanaian traditional community in general.

From the discussion, it would be a foregone conclusion to claim that James' idea of true Christianity would thrive well in the Ghanaian society. Given the concepts of humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood expressed in the Ghanaian idea of the common good, it would seem highly inconceivable that true Christianity, with its focus on the general good of both fellow-Christians and fellow-men/women would fail in the Ghanaian community. Failure to focus on the elements of true Christianity seems to be one of the reasons why the plight of the poor and afflicted in Ghana is relatively neglected.

Implications for Christian Missions

From the foregoing, some implications could be drawn from James' idea of true Christianity. First, Christianity in Ghana must emphasize personal piety. Such piety should involve sympathizing with hearts burdened with discouragement and grief, dispensing resources to the needy, clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, filling the thirsty, and acting in ways that improve the general well-being of people. Second, true Christianity is measured by the work done for neighbors out of love for Jesus Christ. By this means, true Christians reflect the actual character of Jesus Christ. He cared for people He encountered and it is certain that His true followers should do same. To this end, Christians may represent Christ rightly.⁵⁹ Lastly, the act of caring for the needy demonstrates our duty of love for God. This is because it appears that the less fortunate have been placed within the reach of the relatively well-to-do Christian Church. Showing sympathy, care, and mercy to them would amount to expressing love for God.

Conclusion

This paper has taken a critical look at the passage in James 1: 27. In this task, it has been revealed that the main concern of James is an attempt to describe a genuine Christianity. This true Christianity has been shown to be a kind of Christian lifestyle that affirms stout faith in God, the Father, and expressed in an attitude of altruism. Such altruistic acts must not be done in a vacuum. Rather, they should be done out of love for Jesus Christ. In light of this, the paper has further shown that the Ghanaian moral life has created a conducive environment for the propagation and establishment of James' notion of genuine Christianity. By exploring the Ghanaian ideal of the common good, expressed in the two related concepts of humanity and brotherhood/sisterhood of all persons, present-day Christian missionaries have avenues to successfully spread the Christian faith in Ghana. By emphasizing personal piety, performing services that would benefit the poor and afflicted out of love for Jesus Christ, and caring for the needy and afflicted as an obligation from God, Christian denominations and missionaries may effectively evangelize and disciple the Ghanaian community.

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