



## A Contextual Study of Colossians 1:16-17: And the Implications for Christians on Environmental Sustainability

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**Abstract.** Nigeria and the world at large are witnessing great Environmental degradation which threatens the continuous existence of life and other Environmental resources in the ecosystem. The need to address the issue of Environmental degradation which poses great threat to life and other Environmental resources serve as an impetus for this study. The Paper employed biblical historical criticism while applying exegetical rule of context in analysing Colossians 1:16-17 and the implications for Christians on Environmental Sustainability. Functionalism and Biocentrism serve as the theoretical framework. The study finds out that there is a significant level of misconception among some Christians about man's place in the creation and his obligations towards other creatures, which lead to the irresponsible usage of Environmental resources. The Paper recommends the need for construction of theological teachings on the care for Environment among Christians.

**Keywords:** Contextual, Implications, Environmental and Sustainability, Christians.

### 1. Introduction

The effect of climate change is drastically changing the environment worldwide, including in Nigeria. It has impacted environmental degradation and human livelihood in a way that has resulted in competing demands for natural resources, which has exacerbated conflicts and violence between nations and groups over resource access and ownership in ways that inspire religious reactions. According to the Pew

Research Center (2012) over 85% of all individuals have their lives in some way impacted by spirituality, religion, or other faith-based notions, and the vast majority of people in the world identify as religious. The norms and value systems of adherents are significantly impacted by such belief systems and the behaviours that go along with them. Hence the need to look at the role of Christians in environmental sustainability in Nigeria with particular reference to Colossians 1:16-17. Colossians 1:16-17 say "16 For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." The above verses are indications of the cosmological theology of Christ which need to harness.

### 1.1 Background to the Book of Colossians

The background to the book of Colossians can be best understood beginning from looking at the City of Colossae, the Church at Colosse, the authorship of the book, date, place of writing, and the Purpose of writing.

**The City of Colosse:** The city called Colossae was an important commercial town (Brown 2014:599). It was located at the western coast of Asian minor, about 110 miles from Ephesus. The city was noted for its purple wool being a textile centre. Its population was estimated at about 10,000, and was very much Hellenised. It was a city mixed up with the Jews,

Phrygians, and Greek (Horgan 2014). It was in this city that a church was founded but Paul or any other apostle of the early first century AD.

**The Church at Colosse:** The origin of the church in this city is unknown. Acts of the apostles does not mention it and did not picture Paul having his evangelism there (Copeland, 2001:3. The establishment of the church is uncertain. At issue is whether Paul himself had ever been there. Some suggest that Paul may have done some work there during his third journey, on the way to Ephesus (cf. Ac 18:23; 19:1). Others point out that Paul's comments imply that he had not personally been in Colossae (cf. 2:1). One possibility is that the church was established during Paul's extended stay at Ephesus, where the effect of his work spread throughout Asia Minor (cf. Ac 19:8-10). It may not have been Paul himself, but one of his coworkers who went out to Colossae. Paul's remarks in the epistle indicate that Epaphras was the one who preached the gospel there (1:5-8) and in Hierapolis and Laodicea (4:12-13). Though he was with Paul at the time the epistle was written, Epaphras is identified as "one of you" (4:12), suggesting that he may have originally been from Colosse.

Although the Jews were quit of great number at Colossae it was evident that Gentile made up the church there. The mention of Epaphras Gentile in 4:10 supports this fact. This is also supported in Col 1:21, 1:5-8.

**Authorship, Date and Place of Writing:** Copeland (2001) argues that Paul wrote Colossians citing that early sources in church history that attribute this letter to Paul include: Eusebius (300 A.D.), Origen (250 A.D.), Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.), Tertullian (200 A.D.), Irenaeus (200A.D.), and the Muratorian Fragment (180 A.D.). Besides, Copeland notes that apostle Paul, joined in his salutation by Timothy (1:1), and signed by Paul himself at the end of the letter (4:18).

It was in the 19th century that Paul's authorship of Colossians began to be doubted, notwithstanding the addition of the words "to the Colossians" in the epistles. About four points are raised in this regard. First is the style of Colossians which does not tally with that of authentic Pauline letters. Second, is the Christology which does not resemble that presented at Philippians. Third is the issue of heresies which was a second century Gnostic teaching. Fourth is its similarity with Ephesians which makes some scholars think that Paul would not be repeating himself in the epistles. However, based on external evidence, Pauline authorship is favoured. The church has traditionally

ascribed Paul the authorship of the epistle. Barnabas, Tertullian, Clement all knew about the epistle and its association with Paul. Internal evidence also suggest that Paul write the epistle. Its opening greetings indicate that Paul wrote the epistle.

Dating the epistle may have to depend on the acceptance of either Pauline authorship or not. Since we accept it as having come from Paul, and also during his imprisonment, the epistle may have been written between 63 to 67 AD (Brown, 2014). The general consensus is that these epistles were written during Paul's imprisonment at Rome (cf. Ac 28:16, 30-31). If such is truly the case, then Paul wrote Colossians around 61-63 A.D. from Rome. The indication is that the epistles to the Colossians, Philemon and the Ephesians were carried to their destination by Tychicus and Onesimus (cf. 4:7-9; Phile. 10-12; Eph. 6:21-22).

**Purpose of Writing:** There seems to be a consensus between (Brown, 2014; Horgan, 2014; Copeland, 2001) on what necessitated writing of Colossians. These Scholars assert that what led to the writing of Colossians was the arrival Ephaphras in Rome with not-too-good news about the heresy going on in the church of Colossae. This heresy, of course, was Gnosticism which was a problem to many churches in eastern Roman Empire. The purpose of writing the epistle may include the need for Paul to express personal interest in the church at Colosse. Again, it may have been to warn against a reversion to their old pagan ways of life (cf. 1:21-23; 2:6; 3:5-11). Also, the possibility of refuting the Colossian heresy may have been part of the purpose of writing the letter.

## 2. Exegetical Study of Colossians 1:16-17

The most basic of all scientific principles is implied in these two verses (Colossians 1:16-17) that is, the principle of conservation of mass/energy, or "all things" according to this principle, nothing is now being either created or annihilated—only conserved, as far as quantity is concerned.

### 2.1 Context of Colossians 1:16-17

David Naugle (2015:2) observes that in this epistle, Paul is concerned to critique and cancel out a heresy to which the Colossian Christians had yielded. This heresy was of Jewish, Essene or Gnostic origin, and it focused on the spirit world and the worship of spiritual powers and angels instead of the cosmic Christ. Hence, the book of Colossians presents a cosmic Christ who is not only invisible but is concerned with the cosmos.

Exegesis of Verse 16 and 17

Verse 16 “For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” 16a) all things have been created through him and for him.

Michael J. Kruger (2016) avers that the “all things created” include even the cosmic powers that the opponents at Colossae proclaim as all-powerful forces ruling the world. Gerhard Krodel (1994:34) posits that these cosmic powers cannot, therefore, be superior to Christ. He is the Word by which God made, upholds, and rules creation unlike the thought of Arius that Jesus was a creature just that He was higher than normal human beings. Paul counters that idea by stating categorically that all things have been created through Jesus and for Him. They belong to him, meaning he owns them. William Barclay (1975) asserts that He was not just the agent of creation but was also the goal of creation. That is to say, creation was created to be his and, worshipping Him is not a misnomer.

Verse 16b“...and He is before all things, and in Him, all things consist.”

H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S.Exell (2011:12) opine that other things are loose and happen to be consolidated somewhere hence, it is the Divine Word by which they are tied.John McRay (2003:np) observes that Paul does not say He was before all things but he uses *ἔστιν* a verb in the indicative present active 3rd person singular from *εἶμι* depicting the “presentness” of what he is saying. Christ is before all things, be it the ones in eternity past or still to come. He is before all things. That is to say time does not change that reality. This is a depiction that can only be given to God. Meaning the Cosmic Christ existed as pre-incarnate with God the Father, left that place, and came to earth as a human being in his incarnation. In other words, His coming to earth was not His beginning. He had been and always was. William Loader (2017:147) posits that He came from the Father and did not just appear on earth from nowhere. His source is the Father because out of him, he proceeds. Paul uses the word *συνέστηκεν* to describe the relationship Jesus has with all things. Peter Gorday and Thomas (2000:15) claims that all of creation stand with him, meaning apart from him, nothing can survive by itself. The phrase “all things” includes the various supernatural powers specified in the verse’s remaining part.

**2.2 Verse 17: he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.**

Thomas Hale (1996) avers that the word image is the Word *εἰκὼν*, which also means likeness. Since man cannot see God with their optical eyes, by looking at Jesus, the character and qualities of God are seen, for He is God's one true incarnation. God the Father is not visible to the optical eyes, for no man can see him and live. When Thomas asked Jesus to show them the Father, he asked them if he had been with them all these times, and they still did not understand. If they have seen him, they have already seen the Father. Tokunboh Adeyemo (2006) argues that in African Traditional religions, God the creator is distant, but he is also invisible; hence there is a need for intermediaries between him and human beings. Paul thus presents Christ Jesus as that very image of God. The One going to the Father is through him, for he is the way, the truth, and the Life for no one come to the Father but by Him (John 14:6).This points out that using any intermediary apart from Jesus can never take one to the Father. The word “image” implies that the Son shares the same substance as God the Father. It means Christ shares the same substance as God. What makes God; He is the same substance that makes Christ.

From the above verses we could deduce that God did not want to be distant from His creation. In other words, God cares about the physical realm. Therefore, the church which is the body of Christ has a great role to play as it regard substance and care of the environment.

**3. Concept of Environmental Sustainability**

In order to understand the concept “environmental sustainability” it is important to define first, the terms “environment” and “sustainability.” Isife (2012:24) avers that environment can be conceptualised as all physical, non-physical, external, living and non-living situations surrounding an organism that determine its existence, development and survival at a particular time. It encompasses constantly interacting sets of physical (natural and man-made) elements and non-physical, living and non-living (e.g. social, cultural, religious, political, economic) systems, which determine the characteristic features, growth and sustainability of both the component elements of the environment and the environment itself (Muoghalu, 2004).In relation to the environment, Boamah (2015:15) defines the term “sustainability” as the process of ensuring a healthy natural environment – clean water, air and land as well as the protection of animal species.

From the above, it is clear that environmental sustainability relates to the ability of the ecological, economic and socio-cultural systems in a manner that does not limit the possibility of meeting the present and future needs of the various components and aspects of the environment. Environmental sustainability simply put; is the process by which human and non-human activity on the environment is geared towards improving human living standards and protecting/preserving the environment (Igbudu, & Amadi, 2018: 17). It is the mutual and responsible interaction with the environment to the degree of which there is no depletion or degradation of its natural resources and maintenance and preservation of the quality of the environment. This also has to do with the maintenance and preservation of those agents: actors and factors that account for environmental sustainability (Njar & Enagu, 2019:45). Environmental sustainability entails consciousness, an attitude, behaviour or character approach towards the self and one's environment (Adebimpe & Kayode, 2018). It takes cognizance of population, sustainable yield, sustainable waste disposal, and competitive development and industrialization. Ugboma (2015:52) averred that environmental sustainability allows for the needs of man to be met without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. More so, it is the responsible interaction with the environment to avoid depletion or degradation of natural resources and allow for long-term environmental quality. Also, Agunwamba (1998:2227: cited in Njar & Enagu, 2019:45) asserts that the practice of environmental sustainability helps to ensure that needs of today's population are met without jeopardizing the ability of future generations to meet their need.

On the whole, environmental sustainability is an effort to preserve and maintain the ecosystem vis-a-vis proffering and promoting modalities through which human living beings can enjoy a better malicious co-existence. Environmental sustainability takes cognizance of the health of the eco-system in the long run and aims at protecting and preserving the eco-system.

#### **4. Colossians 1:16-17 and Environmental Sustainability**

Some people see Christian faith as something completely internal and spiritual. They classify Christianity as a religion which is solely concerned about their eternal salvation and their self-care. However, Christianity is not only limited to the spiritual but also the physical or cosmos is also a

concern to God. The text under study proves that God is the creator of the heaven and the earth. In fact, Genesis 1:26-27 clearly reveal that man was created in the image and likeness of God and then given the responsibility to take care of the earth (Genesis 2:15). In other words, the earth is the responsibility of man to sustain because in man is embedded the intellectual capacity to preserve the earth. The things in heaven (the invisible realm) are sustained by God directly without the involvement of man. But the things on earth and visible are to be sustained by man.

The two most powerful forces ruling our world today are science and religion. Both attempts to explain our reality as humans as well as shape decision making in our everyday lives. Due to inconsistencies, mainly biological topics, the two have been separated as contradicting beliefs in other fields. However, one of history's most awarded scientists was very vocal about the entwining of the two. In 1940, Albert Einstein declared "science without religion is lame; religion without science is blind" (Einstein, 1940). Einstein is arguing that the two subjects do not make sense without the other. Continuing to keep the two separated may be prohibiting further progress to our world's greatest issues. Currently environmental issues are growing worldwide, and are only expected to get worse. Clean air, resource availability, and bio-diversity are all decreasing. Despite an increased number of terrestrial and marine protected areas and their overall land coverage, bio-diversity continues to drop rapidly (IUCN and UNEP, 2012). Researchers propose the lack of progress on successful conservation is due to efforts focusing on technical solutions as opposed to resolutions that relate to people's vision and values (Vucetich, 2010). A new strategy is needed to inflict urgency of environmental protection that can relate to any person's principles no matter their walk of life. For this reason, it is necessary to evaluate the legitimacy of religion as a possible motivation and tool to promote environmental conservation

Climate change has become a global discussion in recent times especially in United Nations' meetings. It has been ascertained that human activities in the environment grossly impact climate change (Mahmoud & Gan, 2018). Without doubt, human activities help to advance or destroy the environment. For Christians life should not be only about eternal salvation but preserving what God has created because the Spirit of Christ dwells in our hearts (Romans 8:9). Undoubtedly, Jesus is not physically present with us to sustain the environment directly, but He has the church which is His physical representation on the earth. Christian perspective should embrace all of life.

According to Ladam (2012) Christianity is a belief about what life is all about. It is not just about what is within us; it is about what is all around us. Our environment constitutes all that is around us; and as important as we hopefully wait for our heavenly home, we should keep our earthly home in order. Craig (2012) further observes that through the gospel of John 1:3 it is evident that through Christ all things were made that have been made. This implies that Christ is the savior of all. Christ is not only found within. He is found all around.

In Nigeria, the discussion on environmental sustainability has also attracted scholarship with a lot of attention focusing on environmental protection. It is so because Nigeria as a nation has become more alert to the issues after the incidence of the flood disasters that took place especially between 2011 and 2014 leading to loss of human lives, huge socio-economic losses (worth over US\$9.5 billion), and environmental impacts capable of threat to food security. It has also been agreed among scholars in Nigeria that human activities against the environment are grossly responsible for the monumental flood the nation experienced in 2011 and 2012 (Ottuh, 2018:69). One of the major problems apart from the rise of water levels from the rivers that affected coastal areas and collapse of drainages, blockage of drainages by refuse was responsible for the flood disaster. The blockage was a result of indiscriminate refuse disposals into drainages or other water channels by residents. Even in many Christian dominated environments one could see how the environment is less of a concern to many. Any Christianity that does not promote the sustainability of the environment is half-Christianity. In the gospel, when the storm arose as a threat which could lead to loss of lives and even properties, Jesus stilled the storm (Mark 4:35-41). The stilling of the storm is not just a display of the authority of Jesus but a show of concern for the environment.

Clearly a crisis of dilapidation is enveloping God's creation especially in Nigeria. Environmental destruction includes the transformation of forest and field into concrete and pavement, the extinction of entire species, the alteration of earth's energy exchange systems and toxification and pollution of the atmosphere, land, and water systems of the world. George Scott (2021) cites Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew (2010) who states:

We must treat nature with the same awe and wonder that we reserve for human beings. And we do not need this insight in order to believe in God or to prove his existence. We need it to breathe; we need it for us simply to be.

In a sermon from 1789, John Wesley attempted to proffer an answer to the question "why has Christianity done so little good to the world?" this question remains relevant even till this day. According to Rebecca Copeland (2018), in her article, *Christianity can be Good for the environment*, observes that numerous studies of Christian Communities and individuals from the last 50 years show negative correlations between Christianity and environmental protective beliefs and behaviours. She further states that in 2013, a study found that Christians reported lower levels of environmental concern than non-Christians.

### 5. The Role of Christians in Environmental Sustainability

Taylor Allen (2018) observes that in order for environmental sustainability to be effective it must have a method of translating to people's everyday values. Developing countries which include mostly bio-diversity hotspot areas are important to maintain sustainable development. Due to most of these countries following an organized religion, predominantly Christian, an alternative method of conservation may be successful to motivate citizens to participate in efforts. In order for this to be successful, members of the congregation must agree that there is a religious obligation to care for the environment.

Cyprain Alokwu (2017) aver that it is erroneous to believe that information and education is all that is needed to provide solution to the environmental crisis and achieve ecological sustainability; and that awareness is not sufficient to global actors and spectators on the global environmental crisis. He further claims that the environmental crisis has to be viewed from moral and ethical perspective. Failure to comprehend the problem from moral and ethical dimensions is a sign and indication that the values underlying our dominant cultural and economic practices have become bankrupt. According to Conradie (2008), the problem lies not outside but inside us, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart, in the collective psyche. Hence Christians have a part to play in sustaining the environment.

The fundamental standpoint for church's engagement in the environment emanates from its belief that God created and loves His world. He values and cares for it independently of human existence. By this very fact, it is expected that human beings, bearing the image of God (particularly Christians) and as an integral part of that creation, should imitate the concern of God for maintaining and taking care of the earth (Robert and Spencer, 2007:75). In imitating this loving and caring

attitude of God, humans are expected to live in a wholesome relationship with the rest of creation so as not to cause such destruction that species, ecosystems and indeed large numbers of people are threatened. In this regard, Steve de Gruchy (2004) cautiously notes that we cannot just commodify the environment, but are obliged to respect its integrity and honour its creator and owner. Unfortunately, people's non-appreciation of the environment, which is based on a very strong anthropocentric attitude towards nature, is to a very large extent the cause of the current environment and poverty problems.

The mandate to exercise dominion over the rest of the creation should not be seen as a warrant for supremacy and exploitation that it has so often been taken to imply. Rather, God intends that man should have a relationship with his environment. The role of Christians to the environment is in complete stewardship of the environment as God's creation. Undoubtedly, man's activities have a direct impact not only on the environment in terms of the concrete environment but also impacts man as well. Local churches should be very involved not in preaching only but in participating in the care of the community. The biblical understanding of stewardship implies accountability and participation. To move beyond guilt and powerlessness, we need to move from mastery, control and ownership attitudes to an attitude of stewardship toward all of life. This means becoming caretakers of creation with a sense of identification and partnership, rather than dominion and exploitation. To be a steward of creation is to embrace the world, to love as Christ did, and to be willing to sacrifice for the world rather than escape from the world (Johnson, 2000).

One example of a successful use of Christianity for conservation is in Lebanon, where the Advocates for Religious Conservation (ARC) teamed with local government to encourage the Mennonite Church to protect their surrounding forest. Since 2000, the church has not only succeeded in protecting the forest, but two additional forests as well. They are responsible for developing environmental education programs in over 70 surrounding villages, and play a major role on conservation in Lebanon (McLeod, 2015). It could be said that caring and sustaining the environment is an act of love for creation and a proof of honour to God as the creator of all things both invisible and visible.

## 6. Conclusion

Man is not separate from his environment just as God is not separate from His Creation. From Colossians 1:16-17 we see Christ who is the image of God as the

reason and cause of all creation both things visible and invisible. He is interested in holding all things together. However, Jesus Christ is not physically present but is ascended to heaven after His resurrection. Nevertheless, the church which is His body is the physical representative of Christ. Therefore, Christians are not to be only spiritually and heavenly minded but as well earthly conscious and relevant to the sustainability of the physical environment. This paper concludes that the church has a responsibility and part to play as far as the preservation of our earthly environment is concerned.

## 7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby made:

There is need for construction of theological teachings on the care for the environment amongst Christians. Hence, Christian preachers should emphasize the need for active Christian involvement in environmental care.

In imitating this loving and caring attitude of God, Christians in Nigeria are expected to live in a wholesome relationship with the rest of creation.

Christian associations that deal specifically with environmental sustainability should be developed and encouraged.

Christians should be aware as to where science and religion converge for the sustainability of the environment.

More adequate environmental laws should be formulated and passed as public policy to ensure fair management of the environment. Scholars of religions as well as religion leaders and laity should take part in the articulation process of the stipulation

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