



FACTORS INFLUENCING THE KIPSIGIS' PERCEPTIONS OF CHILDLESSNESS: NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

Infertility is a significant problem that affects people of all cultures in the world. However, an increasing number of couples suffering due to childlessness is observed among the Kipsigis community in Fort-Ternan, Kericho County. Hence, the need to understand the reasons behind the changing trend as well as the Kipsigis perceptions of infertility. This study sought to answer the research questions: How does Kipsigis society perceive childlessness? What factors influence this perception? A qualitative study using an open ended interview and focus group discussion are employed in gathering information for this study. Heibert's critical contextualization model is adopted in scrutinizing the Kipsigis perceptions. The narrative analysis revealed five issues: social, cultural, family, religion and economic factors as great influencers to the Kipsigis perceptions. The results suggested that child-bearing is perceived inevitable. Children are crucial in holding the marriage together without which; the union is not fully established. Children play important roles including formation of the family, expansion of the family lineage and they are the future legacy. It is therefore recommended for the Kipsigis Christians to understand the implications of childlessness in biblical perspective and to acknowledge an alternative view in light of God's purposes in the world and to offer biblical, cultural and missiological guidance for the Kipsigis churches and the Kipsigis society.

Keywords: barrenness, involuntary childlessness, infertility, church

1. Introduction

Childlessness is a problem that affects men and women anywhere around the world. In the recent decades there has been studies done by demographers and medics although there are no reliable estimates of its global prevalence rendering this comparison of the study difficult. Missiologists have done little on this issue. Many pastors, including me, can recount numerous stories regarding childlessness from those dealing with the issue,

or the all-too-common narratives of husbands and wives who have undergone heart-wrenching social and cultural challenges due to childlessness. Hearing these stories often left us puzzled and very concerned. Some of these childless individuals were asking deeply reflective questions about their struggles. The following account of a childless woman whom I interviewed demonstrates the anguish that many have to face because of childlessness. She said:

"I am married but do not have children yet. I have experienced numerous miscarriages and what I have suffered in the hands of my in-laws is beyond description. I have been abused in all manners; people throw insults at you and they don't respect you. I have been given many derogatory names, but the worst part of it is that my husband seems not to care. He is unwilling to consider medical treatment for me. I am ten years in this marriage. What can I do? Should I just give up the dream of ever giving birth to a child?"

This is one example among many stories that I have listened to and I did not know how to adequately comfort her. Indeed, I have not always understood sufficiently or responded smartly to the needs of people dealing with childlessness but I am persuaded that in any problem there are seeds of solution emerging from it. I believe that the traditional view of childlessness among the Kipsigis, mandating motherhood above all else, is misguided and blinds us from other important values that must be considered.

My religious and cultural assumption is that children are 'indispensable.' For this reason, I sought to find out what women and couples dealing with problem of infertility had to say about childlessness; their experiences and perceptions. At the core of the investigation was to establish the factors that influence the Kipsigis perception of childlessness with a view to help the couples and the church to realize God's mission in the world through barrenness.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brief Introduction of the Kipsigis

The Kipsigis people are part of the eight ethnic groups that form the Kalenjin. *Kalenjin* literally means "I tell you." The eight tribes include: Kipsigis, Tugen, Nandi, Keiyo, Marakwet, Sabaot, Terik and Pokot. All these ethnic tribes are culturally and linguistically connected even though at some instances speakers of one dialect may find some difficulty in understanding the dialect of another.ⁱ One other thing to note is that the Kipsigis is the most populous group among the Kalenjin. The Kipsigis speaks *Kipsigis* as the mother-tongue. Geographically, the Kipsigis community lives in the highlands of Kericho from Timboroa to Mara River in the south rift, and to the west

ⁱ Ian Q. Orchardson and A. T. Matson, *The Kipsigis*, Abridged, edited, and partly re-written. (Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, 1961), 17; Elijah Arap Soi K., *Kipsigis Words of Wisdom* (Rift Valley Review Associates Sotik, 1984), 3–4.

from Mau escapment to Kebeneti in Kipkelion district.ⁱⁱ In addition, there are other Kipsigis communities living in other regions like: Nakuru, Eldoret, Kitale, Narok and Nandi Hills. However, the Kipsigis are concentrated in South Rift mainly within two current counties: Kericho and Bomet, in the former Rift-valley province.

2.2 Causes of Barrenness

Largely much literature has been written on the causes of the downward trend of fertility in different contexts but is vigorously disputed (Larsen 1994, 1995, 1996; Kirk & Bernard 1998; Mammo & Morgan 1986; McQuillan 2004; Uka 1991). This stimulated me to examine the reasons for the new trend of 'primary' infertility rather than focus on the general causes of lower fertility as referred to by Larsen, Mammo and Morgan as 'secondary' infertility which occurs after one or more births.

2.3 Supernatural powers

The Kipsigis community has high regard for children such that they perceive childlessness as a serious tragedy. The Kipsigis community believes in a world in which evil supernatural powers act as the cause of misfortune. They also believe in a sacramental universe. There is a belief in which physical things often act as vehicles for spiritual ones showing close similarity to what is experience in some part of Nigerian (Asamoah-Gyadu 2007, 440). When it cannot be explain why some couples have the ability to bear children and others cannot, it will always be interpreted that the couple is either bewitched or cursed by ancestors or is being punished by the super powers for unpleasant acts. The departed spirits (ancestors) and witch/wizards are traditionally viewed as supreme and have the ability to cause any misfortune such as barrenness (Mbiti, 1978). Therefore, the need to appease them from traditional view is indispensable.

2.4 Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

The sharp provision of infertility with an explanation implicating sexually transmitted infection as the cause of varied levels of childlessness is evident in the research done in Ethiopia. The case of Ethiopia where childlessness among women aged 30-49 is usually high, provides evidence of this cultural quest (Larsen 1996, 25). These patterns are consistent with an explanation stressing the effects of sexually transmitted diseases, such as gonorrhoea, in turn out infertility. Some scholars share the same sentiments (McQuillan 2004; Mammo and Morgan 1986; Kirk and Benard 1998) that high levels of primary and secondary infertility are usually attributed to gonorrhoea or other sexually transmitted diseases. They mention further that in women who remain untreated, gonorrhoea can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can cause infertility by blocking the fallopian tubes. Gonorrhoea has been reported to be very common in Ethiopia although hard evidence is lacking (Ibid). However, Mammo and Morgan's

ⁱⁱ Burnette C. Fish, *The Kalenjin Heritage : Traditional Religious and Social Practices / Burnette C. Fish and Gerald W. Fish.* (Kericho, Kenya : Africa Gospel Church ; c1995.), 11.

(1986, 534) argument on the effects of religion on the likelihood of being childless seems strictly applicable to Ethiopian context.

Further still, other cultural practices like circumcision are research proven on fertility-related cases. For example, the practice of female circumcision can cause infections that may lead to female infertility (Larsen and Sharon, 2000). This finding appears to suggest that there was high infertility rate in communities which traditionally practice female circumcision in the past compared to modern day prevalence. This is contestable and subject to further research because, among the Kipsigis people, the opposite may be considered true. It can be argued then that there is interplay of factors in the art of female circumcision. Today as opposed to the popular practice of circumcision that could cause infection, such behavior as sexual promiscuity among young generation poses high risks of infection that can result in infertility.

2.5 Modern Contraception

As shown in the statistic carried out on fertility in Tanzania, couples became infertile as a result of voluntary choice (Heaton et al. 1992, 245). By using contraceptive technology and medical technology, couples have shown drastic changes. A good example is seen in the data on family planning program in Kenya in 1999. Potts and Marks (2001, 190) report on Kenya's extremely unusual fertility decline resulting in low population growth in 1998. Without generalizing, the findings can be true to Kenya but may be different to the context under study. Nonetheless, this aspect of modern contraception cannot be ignored even in populations that the use of contraception is negligible since it has exerted significant influence on the fall of fertility in other countries.

2.6 Contextualization process

Critical contextualization theoryⁱⁱⁱ as championed by Paul Hiebert offers a lead toward scrutinizing cultural beliefs and values of reproduction in Kipsigis traditional marriage in light of biblical truth. Hiebert enumerates four steps: the phenomenology, ontology critique, critical analysis and transformational ministry.^{iv} How is this done? Beginning with phenomenology, the researcher gathers information about the incident. The researcher uncovers and scrutinizes the deeper beliefs, values, worldviews and practices of the study population on the old event without judging them. Secondly, in the ontological step, study of the biblical teachings about the event is carried out. Thirdly, evaluation of the old in the light of biblical teachings is undertaken. The respondents' terms are evaluated based on the biblical standards. Fourthly, create a new contextualized Christian practice (a transformational ministry). The researcher leads the church to evaluate critically their own past customs in the light of their new biblical understandings of childlessness, and to reach a decision regarding their use.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1999), 21; Paul G. Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1983), 88.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 88-90.

3. Procedure

This research is based on the analysis of the interviews conducted within a period of six months from February to July 2016 among Christians in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya in Fort-Ternan, Kericho County. The sample consists of 20 childless couples and 7 pastors and 57 ordinary members. Before the interview, the respondents were told that the information they provided would be used for this research. With their consent, I conducted face-to-face interviews and focus group discussion. The results of the interviews were taped in a digital recorder and transcribed.

4. Discussions of the Findings

The researcher coded the information to identify patterns of agreements in regard to the research questions and it enabled the researcher to interpret the findings based on commonality of information given by the respondents

4.1 Perspectives of Understanding the Meaning of Childlessness

RQ1. How does the Kipsigis community perceive childlessness?

The respondents were able to describe in their own words what they perceive as a good marriage in relation to what that marriage entails. Marriage with children in it was viewed as good. Infertility was therefore perceived as a hindrance in achieving a good marriage. Majority of the participants agreed that having children is critical for social and economic survival of the community. They believed that the absolute purpose for marriage is procreation.

Additionally, in the mindset of many participants, they hold to the view that having children is a sign of blessing and lack of it is a 'curse.' The following discourses highlight more of these views.^vOne childless woman narrated:

"One of the things that really cause me much pain is that as a woman in the community, you are constantly reminded that you have no rights and privileges like other women until you fulfill just the primary duty of bearing children. When I realize that I am short of this expectation, I feel mad at myself because as I was growing up, I saw my role in life as a wife and mother. I certainly had hopes for a blessed family. But after ten years of marriage, I am still struggling. My view of life has really changed."^{vi}

Many of the women had the feeling that no 'rewards' had come their way in spite of much effort trying to conceive. Further, some had hopes from childhood that when they grow up they would have fruitful marriage, but with the present struggle, they have come to realize that not all childhood dreams come true.

^v The names of the participants and their churches have been coded to protect identity. Pastors begin with "P1 up to P7"; members in the focus group discussion (FGD) are listed: FGD 1, 2 or 3; and the childless couple with H1-H14 for husbands and W1 up to W20-for wives. The churches are coded from A to K.

^{vi} W6, church B

The traditional value for children is rooted in the African religion that mandates children for all couples and minimizes possibilities of barrenness. In any case, the traditional religion proclaimed all possibilities to provide solution to all problems of human species. It was noted also that on one hand, several informants acknowledged that children are gifts from God, and on the other hand, they were equally persuaded that motherhood was part and parcel of woman's identity and they struggled with it not knowing how to reconstruct their 'self' identity. The question they were grappling with was, Why do bad things happen to good people? Why is there too much pain and God is silent to the cry of the childless?

There was a presumption by many respondents that perhaps God delights in the suffering of his children. One respondent said, "Whenever I read about Sarah, Rachel and Hannah in the Bible stories they stir my heart and bring tears to my eyes except that they ended up being fruitful."^{vii} Another one asserted, "*My understanding of God's command to multiply and increase teaches me that motherhood is important to God. Why can't he allow me to have my own children? Am I a bad woman?*"^{viii} One basic presumption about this problem is that all women believed that their bodies were well until their fertility came into question. One respondent reiterated, "*Children are so important for reputation, honor and equality. Having no children means you will be handled like any other girl. You are excluded from some certain social activities. But couples who have children can do many things, but your childlessness is perceived as a problematic one.*"^{ix} It is clear that childlessness is demeaning.

What can be deduced from these narratives is that childbearing was viewed as societal obligation which every man and woman was expected to fulfill. As a result, most women suffered greatly although their husbands shared in their suffering to some degree. Women are heavily blamed for childlessness because traditionally, childbearing is viewed as the role of women because they carry the womb.

4.2 Influencing Factors to the Perception of childlessness

RQ2. What factors influence the Kipsigis perception of childlessness?

It was noted that different factors played major role in shaping the Kipsigis perceptions of childlessness among the participants. The emerging concepts are discussed below supported by respondents' quotes collected in response to the interview questions. RQ1. How does the Kipsigis society perceive childlessness? RQ2. What factors influence the perception? Results to the second research question were embedded in the response to the first research question. The contributing factors to the perception are classified in the following categories: personal belief system, social and cultural, religion, and bio-medical causal issues. Implications are drawn from the respondents' words and will be used to help the church and society to realize God's mission through barrenness.

^{vii} W2, in church A

^{viii} W5, in church K

^{ix} W2, 19 years of childless marriage, from church B

4.3 Personal belief system

The leading factor to the perception of childlessness among the Kipsigis was personal belief system. All the participants confirmed that children are inevitable. The couples were put under pressure by family members from both sides to procreate. The Kipsigis community has high regard for family relationship and its expansion. One husband narrated, *"When a man marries, you feel a certain sense of entitlement. You see yourself as holding the preeminent position but only if the marriage is fruitful. If you are childless, you become nobody."*^x This means, marriage without children bring with it feelings of shame and pity. Further, within this paradigm there are those who believe that having children, they themselves will be made complete individuals. One man in a focus group stated, *"Marriage is for reproduction. If my woman cannot have babies that marriage has lost its meaning."*^{xi} The scripture teaches that children are a blessing from God (Psalm 127:3); but it does not however give assurance that having children will be the resolution to any of the personal problems of their parents. Under the personal belief system, other aspects as identified below came into play as supporting elements.

4.3.1 Family lineage

Issue number one was expansion of family lineage. In this regard all participants accepted that having children is a sign of blessings to the family and the clan at large. Procreation is required for the expansion of family and only a child represents next generation of the family. One woman in a focus group narrated, *"Having a baby is important but then it must be a son because only male child can expand the name of the family."*^{xii} This expression indicates the preference and importance of boy-child and it has direct relation on how the mother would be treated in the society. This notion has implications on gender roles in many African communities. There are divine roles for each person; male or female. The male child is charged with many responsibilities in the family including: rituals, care of the parents in old age, and to produce heirs who would expand the name of the family. Girls are also important since they contribute to the brothers by dowry through the bride price. Further, children play other roles in the family for example, the eldest son will bury his father and the youngest son will bury his mother.

4.3.2 Children cement the Union between Couples

The second issue was that fruitful marriage would cement the relationship between spouses. One woman stated, *"Children validate the marriage. If you are married and you delay having children you will notice changes in the manner your spouse will treat you. But if you are luck and you start getting children everybody is on your side."*^{xiii} The validity of that partner relationship lies squarely with children. It does not only add the number of the family members but it also strengthens the mutual relationship between spouses and

^x H 4, in church A

^{xi} FGD3, in church A

^{xii} FGD1, 38 year old woman, nurse from church C

^{xiii} FGD3, 35 year old woman, housewife or home manager and from church A

prevents societal consequences like divorce. Infertile women were rejected in their matrimonial home because they are seen as retrogressive. When a woman starts to bear children after marriage, everybody is happy. Child-birth is a celebrated act of life and whoever does not participate in it is a curse to the community. He or she is not only an abnormal but "less human."

4.3.3 Family Formation

The third issue is for the formation of family. Most participants expressed that without children the family is not complete. Majority of childless women expressed the emotional feeling of loss and emptiness in a home without children. Most participants in the three focus groups concurred with them that marriage was meaningless without children. One youth substantiated:

"Why marry if you cannot plan children into that relationship? If people marry and they do not bear children, they do not need to marry in the first place because nothing can satisfy in this life without children. You need something that motivates you to work hard because you want to be responsible. But you cannot only be responsible feeding your wife who cannot give you children. It is like keeping a cow that does not give you milk."^{xiv}

Childless couple would feel embarrassed and guilty. Traditionally couples were expected to do anything possible to keep the marriage from breaking down. Children were indeed invaluable. Because of this emphasis, it is critical for the church to create awareness and break the silence that surrounds childlessness and is needed to produce an alternative view which reflects the spirit of the Gospel.

4.4 Cultural System

Cultural influence system was identified as the second factor influencing the Kipsigis perspective of childlessness. Among the Kipsigis, a parent blesses his children by pronouncing good wishes over their lives when the son or daughter is obedient, discipline and supportive of the parents. Conversely, when a son or daughter is disobedient to parents, the parent may wish or pronounce evil upon him or her, and putting a thorn branch at the door, in the house of the offender to confer a curse on the child. This is reflected in this quotation: *"There are problems that people just invite for themselves. One of my uncles disrespected his father and it angered his father until he cursed him. The offender was affected by the curse, as a result he never married and became a vagabond until his death."*^{xv} The Kipsigis have strong belief and practices of blessing and cursing.

In Kipsigis community, family bonding is so important. The families of the husband and wife can only find harmony in their relationship as a result of grandchildren. If the daughter given out in marriage turns to be infertile, the family would believe that perhaps the misfortune is a result of a curse. Traditionally, a barren woman would be returned to her father's home and the dowry was required to be

^{xiv} FGD 2, a 41year old man, in church H

^{xv} P1

repaid to the husband. This would raise conflict because it was not done in good will. This kind of rejection was based on *"scapegoat ontology."* The husband's family presumes that the girl's parent knew her condition but tricked her into marrying their son. The need to find someone to blame for the circumstance is the essence in this system. Instead of looking for solution to the problem, the woman is thrown out. Other aspects that support the cultural system influence are discussed in the following ways:

4.4.1 One Attains High Status

The findings of this study showed that giving birth to healthy children and especially boys, was highly admired and one would attain high status in the society. Many respondents agreed that a fertile woman gains respect and honor in the sight of the in-laws if they have the ability to bear children. The family rejoices knowing also that the lineage is expanded. Many childless people were concerned about their social status because childlessness comes with its consequences. As such infertile persons are abused, stigmatized and mistreated. Due to such harsh conditions, many are left wandering, *"Why are we childless?"*

4.4.2 Symbol of Identity

In Kipsigis, childbearing is a symbol of womanhood. Most women affirmed that womanhood comes with unique feelings for a woman. All mothers in the focus groups agreed that when you are married and lucky to start to bear children you realize that there is a difference because everybody is pleased with you. One respondent stated *"The feelings of inferiority and fear are far removed and you are filled with happiness. There is nothing compared to that kind of feeling of motherhood."* All women emphasized that children are crucial in family because if you don't have children, you are filled with fear of uncertainty besides being vulnerable. One woman said, *"I don't like being in a group and all they have to talk is children. People are sometime not sensitive to the feelings of others."*

Childless individuals also feel they are missing the most valuable component in their being. Women believe that the experience of motherhood cannot be ignored. It is so important and very pleasant. Couples have felt needs, and the most important need is the feeling of purposefulness in life, which many seek to find it in children. Childless husbands also experience cultural challenges to prove their manhood. A childless man would be deeply affected by his inability to father biological children. The plain reason being that societal pressure would follow him everywhere. Therefore, a man's pain is real just as his wife.

4.5 Social system

The third influencing factor to the Kipsigis perspective of childlessness was social system. The importance of children in Kipsigis society is reflected on the status of parents. When the couples start bearing children, they achieve new status. The adult passes to the next step, a group higher in the social ladder. Inability to bear children thus denies one the opportunity to graduate to the next group in the eyes of the society. One woman narrated: *"If you are childless, you are worthless. I am treated as if I am less*

human. *In terms of ranking, I am not invited whenever there are important meetings in the family.*"^{xvi} With the achievement to produce a child, the couple would not be treated as a girl or a boy anymore; they are seen as mature enough to make decision.

It is clear that childless individuals suffer different social consequences including threats, ridicule, abuse, stigma and isolation.^{xvii} One childless woman narrated, *"Children are so important for reputation, honor and equality in both family and society."*^{xviii} We learn that since men are social being and do not live in an Island; they meet and interact with the members of the society and many times the community seems insensitive to the needs of the infertile. These community members are the ones who demand for children, because the value and identity of the couples is linked to their ability to bear children. Thus, couples tend to feel under pressure to reproduce, and when it fails they are left desperate and with feelings of worthlessness.

The fact that marriage is understood to be a free contribution to the family and society, couples feel obliged to fulfill this mandate. The following point is why many couples are desperate for children.

4.5.1 Expansion of family

In many African cultures, having children is extremely important for the continuation of the family lineage.^{xix} Having children seem to be rather an obligation than an option. Most of the participants accepted that children are essential in marriage because a child can only represent the next generation. One woman said, *"Having children is desirable and more so male child because through him he would ensure the continuity of the family name; 'kolaal mat'- the name of the father is extended"*. A childless husband said, *"People who do not bear children are perceived as not man or woman enough."*^{xx} The society does not only stigmatize infertile people but also sets standards so that biological parents enjoy some prestige that accompanies fertility like leadership. One man said, *"Because of societal expectations and division of labor, no childless couple is eligible for any service in the community and people make up long stories why you cannot have children."* In addition to having children, couples have the pressure to have male child because boys are believed to extend the family name, inherit land, and take care of parents in old age.

4.6 Spiritual System

The spiritual influence system was identified as the fourth factor. The importance of procreation is emphasized in many religious rituals and church ordinances. Many childless women expressed that if they will not have children, their souls would be unsaturated. Children are perceived as essential in marriage. They will help perform duties like burial, care, and heirs. There are cultural rituals that are only fulfilled by

^{xvi} W14

^{xvii} Inhorn and Balen, *Infertility around the Globe*, 15.

^{xviii} W3, from church E

^{xix} D. Kayongo-Male and P. Onyango, *The Sociology of the African Family* (Nairobi, 1984).

^{xx} H9

one's own children. Traditional religious beliefs and the social consequences of childlessness have the ability to exert fear on infertile people.

The findings revealed that the weak believers were more vulnerable and could easily fall prey to false teaching out of desperation for children. Childlessness makes the infertile frustrated and unfriendly. Many infertile persons live in a dilemma over traditional belief and Christian faith. Some confessed that sometime the Christian God is slow and the African traditional god is fast. The story of one desperate woman captures this: *"Why should we suffer? If God is there, why is He not answering my prayer?"* As human beings, we are finite and cannot understand the mind of God.

In the storms of life, such as childlessness, one is motivated to search for spiritual answers to questions such as, why me? Who can help us? Answers can only be found in God according to Romans 7:24. There is need for a biblical explanation that can respond to this missiological challenge. One respondent in one focus group asked, *"How can something wanted so desperately fail to happen?"*^{xxi} This is how worldview plays out clearly, as Heibert describes that worldview is *"what we think with and not what we see with."*^{xxii} The impact of infertility can attract self-judgment.

All pastors concurred that spiritual immaturity among some members was considerable in turning the believers to the old way of resolving issues. One pastor noted:

"You know culture is life. However, culture is bad if it is perceived on one extreme. The fact that we have no written customs or traditions allows people to manipulate things. All that we practice is what is simply passed down to us from parents through stories, proverbs or songs and that is what has been. This means that no one is allowed to challenge the culture but rather we are expected to be loyal to what has been established. As a fact, some things that are passed down are unjust but the problem lies with the structures. If a society sets its norms under such cruel traditions, then victims of circumstances will suffer greatly. For instance, the women are bluntly blamed for infertility without asking, are men responsible too for infertility problem?"^{xxiii}

It was imperative that the pastors understand the implications this culture of the people whose influence is crucial.

4.7 Implications of these Perspectives for Mission

The findings revealed how childless couples in F.G.C.K, Fort-Ternan churches are suffering silently in the congregation as they watch young couples get pregnant, deliver, and raise up children. It is not lost to observation that childless persons are left lonely, isolated and ignored even in the ministry of the word thus affecting their role in God's mission as ambassadors of Christ. There is need for an educational program that

^{xxi} FGD 3, interview in church A; by author in February 17th 2016

^{xxii} Paul Heibert, *Understanding Folk Religion*, 2003

^{xxiii} P2, ministry experience of 48 years, in church E

would enlighten the whole church on the essentials of marriage and family in a biblical perspective.

The findings further indicate the need for effective discipleship in Full Gospel Churches of Kenya. It is apparent that both members and other church leaders are in need of training and re-orientation in the basics of the Christian faith. It is apparent from the findings that the emphasis on childbearing still saturates the minds of pastors and members and majority do not yet believe that marriage without children is complete. The role of the church is to bring transformation in the society in terms of spiritual renewal and in all areas of human life. This would not be effective if the integrity of the church is questioned. It is therefore important for the Kipsigis churches to heed the Lord's teaching as in Matthew 5:14 and be the light in the world. For this reason, Christians would be able to attract non-believers into the faith by becoming role models. Christians are called to a life style and through this, they are expected to preach Christ at all times through their conduct and behavior, as they heed the words of St. Francis of Assisi who said, "*Preach at all times, and if necessary use words.*" Childless couples are also to play a part in this witness since they are followers of Christ, thus the need to develop a sense of belonging in the church as they embark in the art of disciple making too.

It is significant for the Kipsigis Christians to understand that the Bible is full of miracles, including barren women becoming mothers through the power of God. They need to know that this happened because of the divine purpose that needed to be fulfilled. Similarly, Kipsigis childless couples need to broaden their vision of childlessness while they seek to learn what God is doing in the world, because what we often termed as miracles are simply the results of obeying the word of God (truth). It is the faith that they need, to make them see God fulfill His purpose for their lives. We read that Abraham was promised a son, called Isaac, but it took him many years to have that boy, why? His faith faded when he lived in fear, but the moment he believed God and acted upon His word, God fulfilled his promise. God is a promise keeper, when God promises that "*He cannot withhold anything good from those who walk according to his purpose*" (Ps. 84:11), He does exactly that. This is not to suggest, however, that the promises made to the matriarch are to be applied wholesale so that any childless couple should claim them. These Bible passages record specific human experiences and events as it were in historical context and every part of it must be understood in light of God's purpose at that historical time.

It is important, therefore, for the church leaders to support the infertile in examining the scripture for more understanding on the biblical perspective. Some of the helpful ways to employ in helping the infertile deal with the issue could be to put the scripture in context. This could be done by leading the sufferer to reflect on some critical question namely: What has God revealed about Himself in my situation? What do I learn about human nature and human needs? What insights or lessons can I draw into my life and my situation? What is my response to His word? What does God require of me now? How can I glorify God in this situation? What could be God's purpose in this encounter? Approaching it this way is the best strategy for childless

couples because it will help to broaden their understanding of God's purposes and perspective on childlessness. But left alone, all too often childless individuals will begin to do a soul searching and if their search is not directed by the word of God, they are likely to miss the big picture of God's purpose in their lives.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this study was to identify influencing factors to the Kipsigis perceptions of childlessness. To achieve this purpose, interviews were conducted with a sample of 84 Kipsigis men and women residing in Fort-Ternan, Kericho. Many childless couples find themselves living at a cross-road between traditional norms and Christian faith. Childlessness is an issue of deep religious and cultural concern in the Kipsigis community. In many African cultures, bearing children remains the most accepted and common way for women to achieve social status. Again, for men it is also a vital source of esteem. Children are still highly valued in most societies. They are deemed to be an essential component of marriage. The value placed upon children is so high for many people that marriage is, in some contexts, quite irrelevant to the bearing of a child.

There is need for a perspective that engages people's situations today as the starting point of understanding God's perspective and mission in the world and in the lives of His people as He works out His will and purpose, particularly in the lives and families of childless men and women. The church needs to assess her perceptions and/or misconceptions of childlessness and ask if she has really moved away from the traditional view as a critical beginning point toward a transformed view of barrenness that is sound biblically, missiologically, and theologically. The believers should do this because the church's missiology and theology are most often transformed through engagement with local situations and contexts.^{xxiv} The following can be drawn from the findings:

- 1) All the participants affirmed that the Kipsigis people have procreation as the primary purpose for marriage. Childlessness is therefore seen as a tragedy. Some Christian childless couples still find it hard to accept that marriage without children is complete.
- 2) All the participants agreed that children are gifts from God. Those who have the ability to bear and those without are created by God and for His own purpose. So, cultural demands that mandates motherhood deserves scrutiny and change that follows the biblical guidance.
- 3) Eleven childless couples confessed that the Scripture passages that speak of barrenness have turned to become source of perplexity rather than comfort in their situation. All the barren women in the Bible ended up having children.

^{xxiv} Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Rev Exp edition. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2002); Bosch, *Transforming Mission*; A. J. Swoboda, *A Glorious Dark: Finding Hope in the Tension between Belief and Experience* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2015).

- 4) Nine maturing childless couples embraced a biblical attitude. They realized that his or her self-worth, value and identity are found in God and not their ability to bear children.
- 5) Family, society and religion were identified and major influencing factors to the perception.
- 6) It cannot be established that all childlessness is due to God's punishment, a position held by traditional conservative Kipsigis people. The Kipsigis Christians and their societies need to be open to God's perspective revealed in the Bible. God can use any circumstance to achieve His purpose and mission on earth.

5.1 Recommendations

The study hereby recommends the following:

1. The church, as God's instrument on earth, can lead Christians towards maturity from adherence to traditional social values, and become ambassadors for a biblically shaped approach that sufficiently deals with matters of infertility and childlessness.
2. The Kipsigis churches and the society are called upon to value and respect all human being whom God has created without partiality.
3. Pastors will be able to help the believers if they act as mentors. The role of the pastor as a spiritual leader is critical in helping Christians in the church to find solutions to problems in ways that are consistent with the Scripture.
4. The Kipsigis Christians and their churches need to broaden her vision of childlessness while seeking for avenues to create awareness among the believing community on the needs of the childless people.

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