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Nicholas Bhengu and Apostle Paul: Building the Multicultural Movement

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Abstract

The article discusses the similarities between the Apostle Paul and Nicholas Bhengu of South Africa. Its main objective is to demonstrate the significance of multiculturalism as a missional strategy in the postmodern era. Through a comparative-analytical design, the two leaders are discussed from the perspective of their biographical backgrounds, including their places of birth, education, vocations, exposure to the gospel, callings, and how multiculturalism is discerned through their practical ministry involvement. Paul was born in Tarsus, grew up in Jerusalem, and was discipled in Antioch. These cosmopolitan settings prepared him for the multicultural Christian movement he came to propagate. Bhengu was born in Entumeni (a rural village), and worked in Durban as a court interpreter and in Kimberly as a clerk. These were contributory encounters for the multicultural Pentecostal ministry he chose to champion in a racially divided South Africa. The conclusion is that multiculturalism should be considered as an inevitable strategy for missions.

Keywords: Paul; Bhengu; Multicultural; Mission; Church; Pentecostal; Assemblies of God

Introduction

This article is a comparative study of Paul the Apostle, and Nicholas Bhengu, the pioneer of the Assemblies of God Church in Southern Africa. Multiculturalism is the central theme of the discussion, demonstrating that these two leaders strived for multiculturalism, which is an important study area in missional endeavours today.

The discussion starts with Paul's multicultural biography of three cities (Tarsus, Jerusalem, and Antioch) which influenced his multicultural perceptions of ministry. It investigates his relationships with the churches he planted and how he regarded these churches' multicultural compositions.

The discussion then moves to Bhengu, the son of a Lutheran pastor, born in a rural setting in KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. His journey began as a boy growing up on a mission station, working as a denigrated gardener, as a health inspector, as a court interpreter, and finally as a clerk in the diamond city Kimberley, where he was converted by American Pentecostal evangelists from the Full Gospel Church. In 1938 he joined the Assemblies of God, excelling at pioneering the renowned multicultural denomination in Southern Africa.

The multicultural outlook of their ministries is discussed as similarities between Paul and Bhengu are drawn to demonstrate their passion for multicultural faith movement. The conclusion is reached that multicultural Christianity is inevitable in missions today.

Methodology

As a comparative study, the two characters are compared, together with their methodologies of reaching out to multi-racial audiences. Engaging biblical texts and modern literature, the two characters' biographical backgrounds, including their places of birth, education, vocations, exposure to the gospel, and their callings, are explored. The interdisciplinary literature ensures that this research contributes something scholarly rather than duplication of already existing research. Multiculturalism is discerned through the characters' practical ministry involvement.

The term multiculturalism echoes in both political and religious circles in South Africa and beyond. It is a historical and cultural brand mark of South African history of racial separateness. Resane (2019:24) says: "Multiculturalism is a dynamic process within the evolving cultures. It is a massive challenge for South African demographic dynamics due to our history of racial compartmentalisation." In the context of this paper, it refers to an attitude of reaching out to people without any regard for their racial, tribal, ethnic, or religious affiliations. The paper consistently observes that Paul and Bhengu were trailblazers of multiculturalism in their endeavours to preach the gospel.

Apostle Paul

His family background

The Apostle Paul is known for being an apostle to the Gentiles, with no reference to racial bias like Peter in Galatians 2:11-14. This renowned apostle, known as Saul before his conversion and thereafter as Paul, was born in 5 BCE into a Jewish family in the city of Tarsus (Montague 1966:1), geographically located in the province of Cilicia (modern-day Turkey). Tarsus was an affluent and culturally diverse city that valued education. Tarsus attracted people from all over the Roman Empire for vocational aspirations in this rich city. "The city was also a famous meeting place for philosophers and poets" (Lockyer 1972:207), which significantly influenced Paul's philosophy of narrative communication (Gupta 2008:255). This led to demographical changes in the composition of the citizens of Tarsus. Indeed, the birth city of Paul was a melting pot of cosmopolitan cultures (Akintunde 2026:68).

Paul was brought up under strict Jewish laws: "circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews" (Phil 3:5). He was of pure Jewish descent. This background automatically made him a Roman citizen (Wright 1974:404; cf. Akintunde 2026:68), also because he was born in Tarsus. This citizenship gave him legal, social, and political privileges, including travel, voting rights, civil service, state protection, property ownership, tax exemption etc. Around 10 BCE, his family settled in Jerusalem. It is surmised that Saul was born in Tarsus but grew up in Jerusalem.

His educational background

As a youngster in Jerusalem Saul received Jewish law tutelage from Gamaliel in 15-20 CE. He once testified: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city.

I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (Acts 22:3). He received his education in the best Rabbinical school in Jerusalem, which shaped his theological elucidations and missional outlook. The Hellenistic culture and education he grew up with exposed Saul to a diverse cultural and intellectual environment – to the multiculturalism and multilingualism needed for his missionary expeditions.

His faith background

Judaism was an official religion of the Jews, legally recognised as such by Rome. As Saul he was an ardent Christian persecutor with the purpose of exterminating Christians and their faith. His zealous faith was influenced by his Jewish heritage and Hellenistic education.

Because Paul was an orthodox Pharisee, he started his education in the synagogue very young, at around the age of five. This is because of the traditional Jewish belief that the instilling of the law must start early in life.

The first encounter with Paul after his conversion, was in the multicultural, mixed church in Antioch. Paul's life and ministry entered the third city of influence (born in Tarsus, grew up in Jerusalem, fellowshipped and launched into the ministry from Antioch). Antioch was a cosmopolitan city, demographically composed of Jews and Gentiles. It became a major centre of early Christianity. It is recorded in Acts 11 that there was a confrontation between Paul and Peter regarding the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian community (Gal 2:11-14). There were tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers. The arrival of friends of James prompted Peter's retreat, and Paul rebuked Peter for compromising the multiracial accommodation of those who believe.

Paul's multicultural approach to the ministry

Paul's upbringing in the cosmopolitan city of Tarsus, education in the Jewish environment of Jerusalem, and discipleship and fellowship in the cosmopolitan city of Antioch, exposed him to multiculturalism and shaped his multicultural perception of ministry. The Antiochian "community played a formative role in Paul's Christian career" (Taylor 2003:120). Ladd (1977:360) points out that "Paul was a man of three worlds: Jewish, Hellenistic, and Christian." These worlds are linked to these three cities.

For Paul, salvation was a universal gift to all humanity, regardless of racial, cultural, or ethnic background. He "became the champion of the universalistic Christian faith detached from the law" (Ridderbos 1975:16). Paul's ministry was rejected by the Jews, and he explained: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46*).* His audience, as in the city of Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9; I Thes 1) was made up of Jews, God-fearing Greeks, and influential women. The emphasis in this context was "not only the immediate impact of Paul's work, but also the wide appeal of the Gospel to people of different social and cultural backgrounds" (Joubert 2024:13).

It was not only his biographical background that steered him towards his multicultural worldview. It also emanated from his stoical philosophy, which was probably introduced to him in Tarsus, where the university was the epicentre of poetry and philosophy with a strong stoical culture. Stoicism did not adhere to a personal god, psychologically preparing Paul for his teaching on divine grace. With his strong Jewish roots, he was an

expert on the Torah, but due to his Hellenistic culture in a Graeco-Roman environment, he could interpret the gospel in a multicultural society in a way that would be acceptable. His rootedness in the Old Testament and understanding of the Hellenistic mystery religions were the reason for his stoic diatribe, using terms distinct to Greek thought, such as *syneidēsis* (conscience*), physis* (nature), *autarkes* (content), *mē kathēkonta* (the unfitting), etc. From this biographical brief it can be deduced that "Paul's diverse background influenced his thought. Certainly, the conversion did not empty his mind of all his previous religious ideas and replace them with a complete, ready-made theology" (Ladd 1977:361). Hence, he "saw every city as a natural place to preach the Gospel and spread it to the surrounding areas" (Akintunde 2026:67).

Paul was an ecumenist. He had a universalistic outlook of soteriology. He came from the sectarian background of Pharisaism, but conversion to Christ made him all-embracing. The Pharisees' sectarian proclivity ultimately resulted in self-righteousness, hypocrisy, misanthropy, and mechanical legalism. This is not aligned with the gospel of grace that ushers in freedom of condemnation, so it did not fit with Paul's gospel of grace.

His ecumenical stance could not exclude any believer based on economic, cultural, or religious background. He regarded even the churches he never saw (Romans, Colossians) as churches of God, even saying to the Romans: "All the churches of Christ greet you" (Rom 16:16). This is a global perspective. "Paul does not know the Roman Christian community as a whole; he asks this community to greet all his acquaintances in Rome… He shows the community that he is already personally bound to them through many common friends. This builds trust" (Lampe 2003:156). The long list of people to be greeted in Romans 16, both those he knew and those he did not know, signifies his ecumenical perspective which was always multicultural in scope.

Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu

Bhengu is a prominent historical figure in Pentecostalism in South Africa. Any historiography on South African Pentecostalism is incomplete if omitting Nicholas Bhekinkosi Hepworth Bhengu. Authors in different theological fields such as church historians, missiologists, and Pentecostal and Charismatic authors from African soil, refer to Bhengu as a significant figure in research and monographs.

His family background

Bhengu, who was of Zulu descent, was born in the Entumeni Lutheran Mission, Eshowe district of the current KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa on 5 September 1909 (Maphanga 1997:x; Mochechane n.d.:222; Lephoko 2018:41). The Entumeni mission station was in a deeply rural area characterised by rolling hills and valleys.

The role of Norwegian missionary Hans Paludan Smith Schreuder is well documented, not only in missionary endeavours in the Zululand, especially in Entumeni, but also in medical interventions and political negotiations with and on behalf of Zulu chiefdoms.

Life in Entumeni was a bustle of activities typical of a mission station – teaching, preaching, and the usual house chores. Epidemics such as malaria, and battles, especially the Bambatha Rebellion of 1906, destroyed most of the buildings in Entumeni. The church building no longer exists. The school building has been rebuilt and modernised.

Bhengu's educational background

Mochechane (nd:223) highlights that: "Information regarding his education beyond Entumeni is hazy as scholars from Hollenweger to Daniel Lephoko vary and disagree on a variety of pertinent details." What is certain is that after his conversion as a young man he enrolled at the South African General Mission Bible School where he studied for three years (1934-1936). The well-known Assemblies of God magazine, *Pentecostal Evangel,* notes Bhengu's disclosure in 1949 that he could not continue his further studies at Taylor University, Fort Wayne, Indiana, because his wife and children became ill, forcing him to return home without completing his degree in theology studies (Lephoko 2018:48).

What is of interest regarding Bhengu's educational biography is the transformation he underwent at the Bible School in Dumisa. The principal, Rev Fred Suter, strongly influenced Bhengu. Bond (2000:47) describes Bhengu's impression of Suter:

> He was a real father to the students, an excellent Bible teacher of matured (sic) years and a gentleman in the true sense of the word. I personally loved him above my own father. He was so loving. He called me his son, and his teaching had a charming power to my soul.

It was at the Bible School that, according to Watt (1992:34) and Bond (2000:59), one lecturer in a class said: "The world has yet to see what God will do with the man who is fully yielded to Him." Apparently, when the class burst into an uproar at these words, Bhengu jumped up and shouted: "I'll be that man; I'll be that man." It seems that at this point Bhengu started to see or sense God's call on his life to take up the evangelisation of Africa.

Bhengu's professional life

Bhengu entered the job market very early in his life. He started by working for a local white man as what used to be known as a "garden boy". He later worked as a health inspector at Makhathini Flats to control malaria. He moved to Durban to work as a court interpreter (Bond 2000:47; Lephoko 2018:46), and, seeking greener pastures, moved to Kimberley in the Northern Cape. Some authors state that Bhengu was a political activist, working with the trade unions and the South African Communist Party (Watt 1992; Bond 2000; Mochechane n.d.).

Bhengu's faith

Bhengu's father was a minister of the Lutheran Church at Entumeni; he was born and raised in the Lutheran sphere of faith. As he grew up, he developed into a nominal Christian. It 1930, while living in Kimberley, Bhengu visited an evangelistic tent crusade run by Full Gospel missionaries from the United State of America (USA). When an appeal was made to receive Jesus Christ, he did not respond by going to the front, but the next day he privately met with an American missionary who led him to the Lord.

Hollenweger (1972:127) elaborates on Bhengu's conversion experience: What stirred Bhengu's heart was the simplicity of the presentation of the gospel according to Isaiah 53. Above all Bhengu was impressed by the joy and sincerity with which these American evangelists proclaimed their message. This aroused in him the desire to be one of their followers. This agrees with Balcomb's (2011:23) assertion that: "The success of

Pentecostalism is due to the fact that it presents an immediate experience of the power and presence of God."

Bhengu fellowshipped with the Full Gospel Church for some time after his conversion. He came into conflict with the Full Gospel's classical doctrine of *glossolalia* (speaking in tongues) as evidence of baptism with the Holy Spirit. He and two friends, Alfred Gumede and Gideon Buthelezi, joined the Assemblies of God in 1938. "They found encouragement in each other's company and felt no need to belong to any movement" (Watt 1992:36). The three of them joined Emmanuel Mission when Bhengu relocated to Nelspruit to work with Hubert Phillips of Emmanuel Mission, which eventually joined the Assemblies of God. Bhengu and his two friends, working as a team, started the ministry in Nelspruit and it became very fruitful. The team had a ripple effect on the growth of Assemblies of God in South Africa. Hence Watt's assertion (1992:37): "Their self-confidence, dignity and independence were to shape the character and development of the Assemblies of God in South Africa."

Bhengu's multicultural exposure

Bhengu, a Zulu man from Entumeni, became fluent in other South African languages. Balcomb (2005:338) mentions that as court interpreter Bhengu spoke six languages. Lephoko (2018:104) confirms that Bhengu was "specially gifted in speech and in his command of languages". His move to Kimberly exposed him to the local Setswana language, and his long stay in Port Elizabeth (now Gqeberha) among the Xhosa-speaking people made him an expert in this language too. His early ministry in Nelspruit under Emmanuel Mission exposed Bhengu to isiTsonga and iSiswati languages in the then Eastern Transvaal (Mpumalanga). Immediately after joining the Assemblies of God in 1938, Bhengu concentrated on impactful efforts in Benoni on the Eastern Reef which was a melting pot of Southern African languages. His remarkable ministry in the Vaal region honed his Sesotho acumen.

Bhengu was a true multilinguist. Lephoko (2018:79) states that: "He also had a special interest in speaking African languages: isiZulu, isiXhosa, isiNdebele, Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi, Tshivenda and Xitsonga – he spoke most of these languages fluently and wrote most of his church circulars in isiXhosa." And language mastery opens the way to multiculturalism.

Pentecostalism and multiculturalism

From its inception in the early-20th century, Pentecostalism has always been a multicultural movement. The Assemblies of God historians Poloma and Green (2010:6) record that: "Seymour was the visionary whose 'mission' was to found a church composed of members of all races. It was in pursuit of that dream that the famed revival erupted in 1906." Although Pentecostalism historically included multicultural flavours and compositions, in the USA, especially in the Assemblies of God, racism raised its ugly head, which articulated into the formation of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) for blacks in 1907 whilst the Assemblies of God continued to be a segregated white Pentecostal denomination, maintaining the status of a sister congregation of COGIC (Poloma & Green 2010:6).

The early years of Pentecostalism in the early-20th century experienced the real *koinonia* of blacks and whites fellowshipping together without any socio-cultural or eco-

racial distinction. Their interracial accord took place among the very groups that have traditionally been most at odds, the poor whites and the poor blacks (Synan 1971).

The South African Pentecostalism which Bhengu joined was different from influencing scenarios and events in the USA and elsewhere. Chetty (2012:25) highlights this:

> Early Pentecostals were not deterred by the racial tension that existed in the early 20th century between the Afrikaners and the English. Not only did blacks and whites come together in worship, but they also related socially.

They experienced *homothumadon* (togetherness) – feeling bound together in the Spirit driven by love and faith in Christ. Indeed,

> The early Pentecostals in South Africa, like those from Azusa Street, were at first open to receive anyone, irrespective of race or cultural background, as long as he or she had similar Pentecostal experience. The Pentecostal experience initially erased class differences. (Chetty 2012:26)

For people who grew up under the colonial regime and experienced apartheid brutality, Pentecostalism was an alternative, not forced on them by legislative power or by the barrel of a gun, but by the power of the Spirit. The Bhengu generation could see a glimmer of hope, a spark of light at the end of a tunnel. Pentecostal togetherness ushered in that hope.

Missionaries entering foreign fields did not fully convey their home church bigotries into the foreign missions. The conclusion can be drawn that the Assemblies of God was denominationally racist but missionally inclusive. These missionary's exposure, especially here in Africa, probably taught them that Africans are communal people. Their "spirituality emphasizes oneness over categories, commonality over individuality, enchantment over materiality, wholeness over separation" (Nkurunziza 2013:62).

The scenario painted here is not in accordance with either Paul or Bhengu. These two leaders sacrificed enormously by moving beyond all barriers of hostilities to embrace people from all cultural backgrounds. They did not align with the early Pentecostals who associated themselves with the early church which "differentiated itself from its social, cultural, and political environment with a view to live a holy life" (Nel 2015:158). Paul and Bhengu embraced the Messiah's dictum of being the salt and the light of the world (Matt 5:13-16). They agreed that God should not take the believers out of the world but protect them from the evil one (John 17:15).

Paul and Bhengu

While Paul was born and grew up in urban settings, Bhengu evolved from a mission station with a rural demography. Paul traversed between cities and focused his ministry on cities and towns with multiracial populations. Bhengu moved from rural settings to the cities of Durban and Kimberley; his ministry was within townships and villages with multiracial populations. Lephoko (2018:112) relates that Bhengu began his ministry as itinerant evangelist, trying to reach out to sinners with the intention of building a new society.

The common ministry thread of the two leaders was their multiracial audiences. The two leaders applied the method of going where people are and walking with those people in their settings. To substantiate this, Paul could confidently declare: "I have become all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22). Bhengu "had won the hearts of white people and black people alike throughout South Africa and abroad…" (Lephoko 2018:269). Both leaders embraced incarnational ministry of Christ by presence. They did not proclaim the gospel from a distance.

Paul and Bhengu strived for multicultural movement

Paul's context was culturally Roman and linguistically Greek. The Jewish population was still conservative, upholding their Judaism as directed by the Torah. The Palestinians of the time were at least bilingual (Greek and Hebrew) and some were trilingual (also Aramaic). Bhengu's life and ministry was in a colonial mindset and apartheid ideology where English and Afrikaans were the mediums of instruction and government communication. Bhengu was exposed to his ethnic context as a Zulu man and to other indigenous languages such as Setswana, Xitsonga, isiXhosa, etc.

Analogies can be drawn between Paul and Bhengu. Their multicultural perceptions were built by and within their cultural backgrounds. Paul's life formation revolved around the three cities (Tarsus, Jerusalem, and Antioch). Paul was a city man, born in the academic city of Tarsus where the university was the centre of stoical philosophy. Jerusalem, where he grew up, was the centre of religion (Judaism) where he received his formal education under Gamaliel. The church there was mainly Jewish, so could not be a space for launching Gentile missions.

Antioch was a multicultural city with a church composed of mainly Gentiles. This multicultural church was distinctly missional in its operations (Acts 13). The Antioch church was structured around the apostles' doctrine; it included some teachers and was also a prayerful church (Acts 13:1-4). Tenney (1978:253; cf. Kwiyani 2025) asserts that "Antioch virtually superseded Jerusalem as the home of Christian preaching and as the headquarters of evangelistic missions." It was where world missions were set in motion, because, "In Antioch they crossed the border of Judaism. In baptizing non-Jews, they accepted them as members of the people of God only on the ground of their christological conviction…" (Koch 2005:290). From Acts 13 onwards, crossing the cultural border enhanced missiological endeavours as ministry started taking the shape of multiculturalism.

Paul's conversion and calling were dramatic. While on the way to Damascus to arrest and imprison believers, he received a revelation of Christ (Acts 9). To be struck down with lightening in daylight is a supernatural phenomenon, hence his declaration in 1 Corinthians 15:8-9 that he was abnormally born and was the least of the apostles. The conversion and call upon his life were simultaneous. He later defended himself to King Agrippa, detailing his conversion which is intertwined with his call (Acts 26:12-19), and climaxed this by affirming: "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven."

Paul did not doubt the origin of his call. He believed convincingly that he followed a divine mandate and intent.

Paul's socio-cultural background shaped his philosophy and theology of multiculturalism. This is why, in his writings,

> God is portrayed not only as a father figure within the familial structure but also as the creator of the community and of the whole of humanity. As a result, believers are viewed as both fellow citizens and siblings, united under the divine parentage of God. (Punt 2024:151)

This reveals Paul's universalistic salvation that, in Christ "there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all" (Col 3:11). He reassured the Galatians that: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Ephesians (2:19) were also reminded: "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." To the powerful multicultural church in Rome, Paul could emphasise: "As Scripture says, 'Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him. For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" (Rom 10:11-13).

Paul's writings portray him as a man of love for his audience. He lovingly addressed even his critics with love. Examples include Corinthian, Philippian, and Galatian Christians; in these churches he had critics, but he knew how to navigate this to embrace them. Criticism is a price often paid for multicultural ministry. Guthrie (1975:388) refers to Paul as a man of authority but also a man of love. He points out that: "He was, moreover, a man capable of drawing out love, even the love of those inclined to be hostile to him" (1975:388). Paul crossed the borders (Koch 2005). Paul understood that multiculturalism calls for embracing all people regardless of their ethnic, religious, or credal confessions. This is confirmed by Harrison (1987:22):

> The primacy of love, bearing one another's burdens as the fulfilment of the law of Christ, the place of sacrifice, and denial of self are only a few of the high points at which we trace the influence of the Master upon the servant Paul.

The goal of Paul's love was embracing multiculturalism, which the churches he helped to plant also ended up embracing. Although many of the churches of the time were city churches, the fact remains that they possessed a strong integration capacity of transnational and trans-cultural character (Tilly 2016:227). Tensions arose, yet these did not dilute or pollute the founding apostle's vision of multiculturalism.

Bhengu's exposure to the multicultural demographics in Entumeni shaped his universalistic view of humanity. The Lutheran mission station where he was born was a racially mixed environment. Being a court interpreter made him open to facing and interacting with people of different cultures and races. His stay in Kimberley, the diamond city that attracted variations and diversities of cultures, exposed him further to a multicultural worldview whereby all people are viewed as humanity without any discriminating lenses.

What really ignited and echoed his multiculturality was the vision of his calling to the ministry. This vision is well documented and circulated among scholars on Bhengu

and Pentecostalism in Africa. Dubb (1976:10) is the first author who recorded this vision verbatim from Bhengu:

> The Lord explained to me that I was authorised to serve Him, but I did not know how to go about it. He showed me a great ocean to which He brought me. There I heard the voices of many people crying in fear of death. They were all under the water and their hands and feet were bound with chains. But they were trying to set themselves free. They all had black faces. When I listened, I noticed that one could hear their voices. They were speaking in all African languages and dialects, and yet I was able to understand them all. They were all pointing at me for I was standing on dry land, and said: "We are dying, we are dying. We are perishing. Help us out of here." I felt a great sympathy and wanted to help them all out of there. But they were as many as the sands on the seashore. The more I tried to help them the more I sank into the water. Bewildered, I called on the Lord. Jesus appeared and lifted me out. He showed me an open Bible and said: "This is the Word of Life; study this Word, and through the words of this book you will break these fetters and free your people from the chains of sin, in which they have been bound for centuries. I wish you to do this."

Bhengu never wavered from this call from God. He believed unreservedly that God authorised him to serve Him. He took this vision seriously and regarded it as a mandate from the Lord to preach the good news (Lephoko 2018:79). He believed that his calling was to Africa and Africans to come back to God. As stated by Balcomb (2024:33): "Thus, the name of his mission, the 'Back to God Crusade'." His passion and vision were to preach the gospel from Cape to Cairo. From this passion he developed a clarion call "Africa Back to God! Africa for Jesus – Jesus for Africa!" to fit with the vision of black Africans, to whom he felt specifically called (Lephoko 2018:79). "This message is fuelled by the traditions of Holiness Pentecostalism, Spiritual Revivalism, Pan Africanism, and Black Consciousness" (Balcomb 2024:33), embodying repentance and personal transformation, the Holy Spirit's power to transcend circumstances, combating dependency syndrome by embracing self-upliftment, self-support, and self-rule, and, of course, psychological emancipation from white domination.

Bhengu's multicultural Assemblies of God in Southern Africa is a testimony of what reverberated in his heart, of his Cape to Cairo vision. He knew that he should go to people, not wait for people to come to him. For him, communities are never built around the church but around a place where they live (Podolecka & White 2021:76). "Going where they are, walking where they walk" was his strategy of building a multicultural movement.

South African church historian Kevin Roy (2017:129) asserts that "from the time of his conversion to Christ, he had a passionate desire to see people of all races, cultures and classes come to an experience of salvation, peace and unity in Christ". This is confirmed by Watt (1992:179):

> The vision that Bhengu had of the future included whites. He believed in a church for all people but counselled that this should not be engineered – he believed that it

> should be left to the Holy Spirit. His conviction that the church should be united motivated his determination not to be alienated from whites.

Bhengu's ministry was therefore itinerant, doing tent crusades – the mass evangelism that was relevant and effective in his time. He travelled around Southern Africa and beyond with his Back to God crusade, crossing ethnic, tribal, and racial barriers. There is not a single tribe in South Africa that has not heard or experienced Bhengu's message of salvation.

Bhengu designed some strategies in order to make his multicultural movement relevant and acceptable to communities. The Assemblies of God was originally an American denomination and, in its formative years, the *Negro* S*piritual* songs formed the greater part of music during worship. He encouraged churches to adopt hymns in indigenous languages of Southern Africa. Resane (2024:2) states:

> Church choirs sing choral music based on tonic solfa and are strictly identified by black and white attire. Church music is a mixture of contemporary African gospel music and traditional hymns, using various traditional hymn books such as *Icilongo leVangeli* (isiZulu), *Lifela tsa Sione* (in Southern Sesotho used by both Setswana and Sepedi speakers), Methodist Hymnbook (isiXhosa and Setswana), *Mhalamhala Ya Evangeli* (isiTsonga), and *Phalaphala Ya Mafhungo-Madhifa* (TshiVenda).

He laid the apostolic foundations that continue to mark his multicultural movement, differentiating it from typical Assemblies of God around the world. Resane and Lephoko (2026:2) emphasise that:

> Bhengu also introduced structured biblical liturgies across all AOG Back to God churches, notably incorporating 1 Cor 14:26–33 (Orderly Worship) and 1 Tim 2:1–8 (Prayer for Governments) … By embedding these texts into the liturgical rhythm of Back to God assemblies, Bhengu advanced the priesthood of all believers, ensuring that every member had an active role in worship and intercession. The inclusion of prayer for governments also reflected his vision of socially responsible Christianity – encouraging believers to pray for leaders and the nation as part of their regular worship life.

Referring to the Pauline texts and the authors cited above (Resane and Lephoko), it can be deduced that Bhengu's ecclesiology was Pauline and his leadership very much like that of Paul – apostolic, foundational, Christological, and pneumatic. Paul's focus in Galatians is on sharing love, a different kind of love of self-giving – as Bhengu displayed. This love is elucidated on by De Villiers (2014:155):

> Love is about believers who understand that their relationship with God causes them to reach out to others. It thus implies a movement away from oneself towards the other. In this movement, one shares oneself with others. As such it is, once again, strongly integrated in a relational setting.

Bhengu knew that embracing multiculturalism is costly. One of the costs is loving people unconditionally. It means embracing all people regardless of their social standing. Those who worked with him tell stories of how he related to children, youth, adults, the poor etc. Any person could feel at home around him. He moved from himself to others.

Above all, Bhengu believed in prayer. He believed that: "Praying for the political spheres is often understood as a biblical obligation because of the Pentecostal belief that only through prayer can God bring transformation into the nations" (Kaunda & Kaunda 2018:71). It is for this reason that Bhengu was also criticised for political disengagement in a typical liberation war against the *status quo*. Bhengu opined that only through faith in Christ, and by prayer, will human conditions change. His goal for multicultural movement was that the new community he was building should gain a new identity based on their faith in God the Father and in the Lord, Jesus Christ (Joubert 2024:15).

Key findings

Multiculturalism liberates Pentecostalism from heretic categorisation – as the experience of baptism in the Holy Spirit is experienced by people from all denominational cohorts. Paul and Bhengu were leaders who were multilingually educated. They knew that the door to multiculturalism is multilingualism. They understood that languages help to unearth hidden content; "Languages are best learned while sharing in the ways of life of the people concerned rather than in a classroom" (Harries 2016:38). If the two leaders were alive today, they would resonate with Bosch's (1991:512) assertion: "Our mission must be multidimensional in order to be credible and faithful to its origins and character."

Recommendations

Multiculturalism should be an ecclesial mandate as a missional goal. It glorifies God who is the Creator of the universe and restores humanity to its original design where nations are all of one blood; therefore, qualifying them for God's kingdom here and beyond.

With globalism and trans-cultural realities fuelled by migrations, democracies, and technological advancement, multiculturalism is inevitable. It should be part and parcel of pedagogical processes, including curriculation and enculturation.

Multicultural Christianity is an inevitability in missions today. All missions' strategies should aim for multiculturalism for the extension of Christian faith in the global world.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that multiculturalism is a missional strategy in the postmodern era. Through the analysis of Paul and Bhengu as multiculturalists, it discovered that they both possessed cultural intelligence, which is the innate potential or aptitude to sense and accommodate cultural differences (Stallter 2009:544). The two leaders knew various cultures, enabling them to navigate other cultures. The Apostle echoed this sentiment to the Corinthians: "To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22). Bhengu's traversing of the African landscape, preaching the gospel to thousands, testifies that he was a true multiculturalist.

Paul and Bhengu clearly insisted that multiculturalism is a phenomenon which is inevitably pertinent to the ministry. It is a way of making salvation relevant as a gift to depraved humanity. This ministry approach allows believers from all cultural backgrounds to experience heaven on earth. The kingdom that Paul and Bhengu preached, portrays universalistic redemption whereby *imago Dei* is a mark that all humans carry. It is an eschatological view that the kingdom of God is realistic, and that humanity, which is a multicultural entity, is the key component of God's kingdom.

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