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Winds Of Change In Contemporary Missions

by Yemi Ladipo

Summary: The call of the church is to be catholic, i.e global and mission-oriented. Yet the very terms of her missionary service seem to be changing, argues, Yemi Ladipo. Starting with the sending church of the West (with a view particularly to the British scene), Rev. Ladipo looks at the impact of such trends as home and short term missions, competition for charitable giving, higher support figures for missionaries and changing qualifications of the missionary Candidate. He then surveys new trends among the receiving churches of Africa. His conclusion is that the church must not retreat from the call to missions but rather adjust to these new challenges.

Winds of change continue to blow unabated across the contemporary mission scene. The church is slow to recognise change because, as Bishop John Neale rightly pointed out, it is disastrously short on a theology of change. These changes, if honestly recognised and openly discussed, will have a profound effect on our cultural assumptions about world mission. Let me note a few of these winds of change.

Changes Taking Place in the Traditional (Western) Sending Church.

1. There is a great decline in the number of missionary candidates offering for long-term missionary service. In a recent survey of sixty-eight enquirers who completed missionary application forms within a year, only one person put "however long we are needed" for the expected length of service--and he did not pursue his enquiry. Although many enquirers did not state how long they wanted to work overseas, twenty-two specified two years and four specified

three years. Although these statistics are not conclusive, the trend towards short-term missionary service seems clear.

A number of reasons have been advanced for the change: the desire of missionary candidates to keep abreast of development in their own professional training; job security at home; the fact that mission is viewed as a project, with a built-in duration timetable; people's concern for their children's education (which involves the residence factor for University grants); the change in immigration laws which in certain cases may affect the nationality status of those born outside of the United Kingdom; the desire of wives to work; and the fact that "temping" is now commonplace. Whereas thirty years ago, young people did think in life-time terms, I doubt if they have that conception today. "Two years is an eternity for many," according to the Rev. Canon John Ball, the General Secretary of the Bible Churchmen's Missionary Society. Also, there is the fact that there are over sixty countries in the world which refuse visas to Westerners. If missionary involvement is to continue in these countries, people will have to go as "tent-makers" on shorter term contracts.

Thus it could be argued that VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) has shown remarkable foresight by recruiting personnel to serve overseas for two years with a possible option of only one renewal. For some, mainly historical, reasons, quite a number of missionary societies are unwilling to come to terms with this trend. Meanwhile VSO continues to reap the harvest at a time when missionary societies (with more attractive conditions of service) are experiencing great difficulty in recruiting people for overseas service. According to the statistics in the VSO 1988 Annual Review, VSO currently receives 3620 applications a year has 1125 workers abroad, 682 of whom are involved in education and technical training; the average age of VSO workers is now 32; 55 of VSOs are male, 45 female; the longest serving male VSO is six years (in Papua New Guinea) and the longest serving female VSO is five years (teaching in Malawi).

It is interesting that the report made clear that in VSO, priority is given to jobs in which volunteers train others, rather than carrying out the tasks themselves, and that many volunteers extend beyond their initial two years. For example, out of the 552 VSOs who departed overseas in 1984/85, 96 of them have extended for a third year.

2. The appeal of Relief Agencies lies in the quick and visible results they are able to show their donors. It is becoming increasingly difficult for missionary societies to balance their books because some of their traditional supporters now support Relief Agencies as well --sometimes at the expense of their missionary giving. You cannot show on television a picture of a spiritually hungry person in Ethiopia. Pressure is on missionary societies to become more cost-effective in their operations in order to survive.

"There is much generosity even if it is 'impulse giving'," admitted the Rev. Kenneth Skelton in his interesting article, "Mission and the Message" (*Church Times*, 17 March 1989, page 11). He went on to say:

Impulse giving needs a personal object. The pictures of a starving child, or a family camping in snow outside their ruined home, will tap the well-springs of our compassion. Theological education in Central Africa will not--however carefully thought out the presentation. Yet, for a young church, that may be a really desperate need.

Many Western missionary societies shy away from planning strategically, perhaps because such an exercise would force them to consider when to wind up their operation in a given area, and would inevitably lead to the drawing up of a measurable standard of performance for their missionaries. To do this (so the traditionalists argue) will mean introducing a "success" orientation into missionary endeavour, something which the British consider to be American. Others argue that making the missionaries accountable is part and parcel of good Christian stewardship.

A continuing drop in the annual income of many missionary societies, combined with a shrinking mission field, and the demand for specialist personnel will inevitably lead to a re-alignment of medium and small sized missionary societies. There is too much duplication of effort going on among missionary societies, leading to unnecessary wastage of limited resources. There are too many "corner shop" missionary societies taking on the posture of "supermarkets" and it appears that if the quiet voice of the Holy Spirit will not get their attention to work together, economic recession will. Traditional missionary loyalties must not be allowed to stand in the way of God's good and perfect will for now and for the future.

A welcome sign of such a movement towards closer collaboration is the emergence of such organisations as the PWM (Partnership in World Mission) and the EMA (Evangelical Missionary Alliance). Commenting on the Church of England's decision to set up a new Board of Mission and on the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland due to come into operation next year, USPG magazine had this to say:

Here is an opportunity for the Societies to bring their mission concerns along with overseas experience, to the very centre of the churches' life. They will be able to do so all the more effectively if they can begin to draw closer to one another, overseas churches constantly urge the societies to "get together" (USPG Network Editorial, April 1989).

3. Some rich parishes want to send and support their own missionaries or to support national workers or projects, without going through traditional missionary societies. Since most of the support of missionary societies comes from the contributions of local churches, loss of income from large prosperous parishes can (and often does) have an adverse effect on their operations.

4. The high cost of supporting missionaries, especially those with families, is a matter of great concern among the traditional supporters of voluntary missionary societies. The average cost of supporting a family of four is about 12,000 (5,000 for a single missionary).

People are beginning to question the wisdom of sending couples with children overseas and why it is that missionary societies cannot follow the example of VSO in sending couples without children, with possible exceptions for missionaries with skills which are almost impossible to recruit locally.

5. There is the question of the spiritual calibre of missionary candidates, some of whom are from broken homes, and some who have deep emotional needs that could cripple their effectiveness as missionaries in a different culture.

It can be argued that by demanding professional qualifications as a necessary condition for missionary service, the overseas church has put employment before missionary service, and therefore the secular before the spiritual. It would therefore make more sense for a Christian professional (at least in some cases) to work and witness as a government employee on contract rather than as an employee of the national church. As a "tent-making" missionary, his or her

salary will be paid by the government to do the job which the Lord called him or her to do--to teach, to be a doctor, and at the same time, be an effective witness for Christ.

These are but a few of the winds of change that are blowing across the west, challenging the way we do missions. But other winds are blowing among the receiving churches, particularly in Africa.

Changes Taking Place in the Receiving Churches of Africa

1. The control of immigration by independent African states is getting tighter. British passports no longer guarantee automatic entry to former colonies. Length of stay is now governed by government regulations and visa and work permits are issued for a specified period of time-- between two or three years maximum. Thus a person may feel called to serve in Nigeria for an indefinite period but his residence permit and work permit will only be valid for two years with only a possibility of renewal.

2. The demand for professionally qualified missionaries. The Church in Africa has come of age and has become increasingly more specific about the kind of outside help she needs for her continuing growth in maturity. Africa has plenty of skilled artisans, but the lack of formal education in technology and modern science limits her effectiveness in certain areas. The Church therefore needs people with communication skills who are able to replace themselves by nationals within a short time. In many parts of Africa, governments will only issue work permits to those with skills which are in short supply in their respective countries.

3. A growing determination among church leaders to tackle the problem of perpetual dependency on foreign support. There is a desire among the receiving churches "to stand on their own feet" rather than remain tied to the apron strings of the well-meaning missionaries who have come out to help them. The aim is to prevent missionaries over-staying their welcome or becoming too expensive to be replaced by nationals.

4. Many perceptive African Christians welcome the increase in short-term missionaries because they come with a teachable attitude, an adventurous spirit and a willingness to learn and make the necessary cultural adaptation. African pastors now have unprecedented opportunities to help provide spiritual nurture

for the young missionaries in their midst and in doing so, gain experience in cross-cultural ministry--a useful preparation for sending missionaries to the Western church in the future.

5. There is a demand for reciprocal partnership in world mission. The Church in Africa has come to realise that a church not engaged in cross-cultural mission will for ever remain a mission field. Israel's Dead sea owes its name and state to the fact that it has no outlet. A church without missionary outlets to other nations has really not come of age and may become spiritually weak. The African church should and must seek to share its vital faith with the global Christian community. Gone are the days when it was said that "theology is constructed [and often corrupted] in Europe, corrected in the USA and consumed [wholesale] in Africa." The African Church has gifts to bring to the Church catholic by which we can all be enriched in our understanding of Biblical Christianity.

Conclusion

The winds of change blowing across the missionary scene today demand a new breed of missionary as well as a restructuring of the missionary apparatus, which would be geared not only towards sending but also receiving. Adapting to change will be costly because it will force us to re-examine our cultural assumptions about world mission in the light of Scripture.

The Church worldwide must rediscover that spirit of Christian adventure that comes from an unconditional surrender to doing God's will in His world.

***Doing African Christian Theology:
An Evangelical Perspective***

by Richard J. Gehman

(Nairobi, Evangel Publishing House, 1987) 130 pages.

Dr. Richard Gehman, a long serving missionary in Kenya and former Principal of Scott Theological College, has written a valuable survey of the development of Christian theologizing in Africa by Africans. Its twofold purpose is, on the one hand, to expose the anti-Scriptural foundation that underlies much of what has already been published on the subject and, on the other, to encourage more evangelical scholars to make up for this deficiency by presenting a more biblically-based articulation of what it means to "do theology" in an African cultural setting. Gehman takes as his keynote the well-known observation by John Mbiti (1972) that "Christianity has Christianized Africa, but Africa has not africanized Christianity" (p.i). He concludes his brief, but well-documented, study by saying that it would be "more accurate to state that Christianity has to some extent Christianized Africa but Africa has not fully africanized Christianity" (p.109). One has to carefully read this book in order to appreciate why the author has come to this rather pessimistic assessment of the current theological scene and, more importantly, to evaluate Gehman's several proposals for improving the situation--from an evangelical perspective.

Four chapters outline Gehman's discussion of African Christian Theology (ACT) with regard to need, history, proposed methodologies, and evangelical correctives. In chapter one he describes several early missionary attempts to contextualize the universal Gospel message in Kenya, particularly in relation to the perennial problems of female circumcision and polygamy. Yes, as we all know, these pioneer evangelists made their mistakes, but Gehman rightly points out that they were not all ignorant of and/or insensitive to the realities of African culture as many contemporary theologians like to claim.

Gehman concludes this first chapter with a useful summary of the reasons why ACT--or as he prefers, "Evangelical Christian Theology in the context of Africa"--is necessary today. However, the eight points that he presents could

probably be more succinctly stated in four, or perhaps even just two. First of all, from an internal perspective, the Christian churches in Africa must be able to correctly apply the Word of God to the specific problems, needs, resources, and potentials which confront them in their own situational and sociological context. And secondly, with an external view toward the Christian Church at large, the African contingent has an obligation to contribute its own unique perspective on biblical truths for the ultimate development of a richer, more complete and balanced Christian theology worldwide.

Chapter two is divided into two main parts. In the first, Gehman presents a historical sketch of "the origins of African Christian Theology." There are two minor problems with this treatment: It is too sketchy and should probably be specified as applying only to East Africa--or simply Kenya alone. Secondly, it overlaps with the "early missionary" material included in chapter one, and thus the two passages could well be consolidated into one. But we do find a number of helpful observations scattered throughout this section concerning some of the reasons for the early missionaries' failure to develop a fully relevant theology, especially in relation to the problems of sickness and spirit possession. However, I would question Gehman's apparent promotion of the "power encounter" approach when dealing with assumed cases of possession. This is certainly not the only possible evangelical way of dealing with the problem, and I seriously doubt that it is a method that ought to be practiced by "younger student pastors" (p.34). The issue probably needs some additional treatment in a future revision of this book.

Gehman then goes on to point out several important reasons that support the need for developing an African "theology of relevance" and "selfhood" in indigenous identity. He mentions, but perhaps does not sufficiently elaborate upon, the fact that ACT was continually developing from the very beginning of the Christian witness on the continent, primarily by means of the "oral theology" of sermons, prayers, songs, instruction classes, and so forth (p.28). I was happy to note his periodic emphasis upon the equally important factor of Bible translation: "Africans have been reflecting on the Scriptures since the Bible was first translated into the vernacular languages" (p.27). Bible translation is doing theology at the most basic level because it cannot properly take place without a careful reflection on what God meant to say in his Word and how best to communicate this via an indigenous language in a local

sociocultural setting. The problem with this first generation of translations (which Gehman does not call attention to) was that they tended to be too heavily dominated by the foreigners who brought the Scriptures, the result being a host of generally literal, unidiomatic versions that were all too often very hard to understand and hence also more difficult to meaningfully apply to African life.

In the second part of chapter two, Gehman makes a selective, but useful, survey of some of the more important titles in the corpus of literature on ACT. This leads directly into chapter three where he undertakes a critique of a number of the proposed methodologies dealing with ACT. A sample of the familiar names are briefly, but incisively, considered from an evangelical perspective: Dickson, Kanyandago, Kurewa, Tutu, and Nyamiti. Gehman rightly reserves the most space for ACT's "father," John Mbiti, but perhaps gives too much prominence to the latter's theory of time as it affects African theology. However, lest we become too pessimistic in our appraisal of the future of theologizing in Africa, Gehman cites the case of Byang Kato, an early scholar who attempted to counter such liberal trends and worked towards developing ACT according to sound Scriptural and evangelical lines.

But Kato was a lone light for his time. In one way or another, some more than others, the eminent (published) theologians of the day all illustrate the principle that "a faulty methodology will inevitably lead to a faulty theology" (p.43). And a faulty methodology, in turn always results from a faulty view of Scripture, namely, one which denies its ultimate unity, authority, and inerrancy. Gehman's critique clearly reveals that "liberal theologians...do not believe in the same kind of Bible as evangelicals do" (p.46), and consequently much of their work is marred by a theologically fatal cluster of "-isms": universalism, relativism, subjectivism, skepticism, rationalism, existentialism, and syncretism. The last item is manifested particularly in the formation of "ethic theologies" (p.50) that result from a flawed conception of "the relationship between Scripture and traditional religion and culture" (p.49). Indeed, it is essential to contextualize Scripture within the particular society and culture in which it is proclaimed, "but we also need to let Scripture 'de-contextualize' us" (p.61) in terms of the universally relevant Gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Gehman devotes the latter portion of chapter three to a presentation of nine "guidelines for developing African Christian theology" along more biblical lines. This section should probably stand as a chapter on its own to give it the

proper prominence within the book as a whole. Gehman summarizes his position as follows (p.77):

Contextualizing theology is that (8) dynamic process whereby (1) the people of God (6) living in community and interacting with believers throughout time and space, (4) under the illuminating guidance of the Holy Spirit, (9) proclaim (7) in their own language and thought forms, (5) the Word that God has spoken to them (3) in their context (2) through the study of the Scriptures.

Gehman elaborates upon each of these principles in the effort to delineate "a methodology of contextualizing that will make theology both relevant to the context and faithful to the Scriptures" (p.77). Especially valuable is his treatment of point three on the relationship between theology and culture. Here it is important to remember that

"Our cultural context is the medium through which the God communicates and by which we respond. But culture does not shape the meaning or message of theology (p.83)."

Two other crucial aspects of any programme to promote ACT are the need to encourage "theology at the grass roots" (p.87), that is, at the unsophisticated lay-level of reflection and articulation, and also to avoid an ethnic African sectarianism by maintaining links with "the historic Christian affirmations of the Faith" (p.87).

From the preceding general guidelines which provide a framework for developing an evangelical approach toward ACT, Gehman moves on in chapter four to offer four concrete proposals as to how the task might currently be effected. Theologians must first clearly state their presuppositions concerning the authority of the Scriptures, the proper method of biblical interpretation, and their concept of culture. With regard to our cultural assumptions, Gehman proposed five fundamental affirmations which summarize a Bible-based, evangelical position (pp.94-95). Indeed, these are worth remembering. Gehman's second proposal concerns the need for organizing a comprehensive plan for theological reflection in the African context. Gehman's own suggested seven-point action plan is presented in detail, and although readers will probably not agree with all of its various aspects, it does offer a refreshing change from the overly abstract proposals that one usually reads in similar contexts.

Gehman's third proposal is that evangelical Christian churches research the crucial needs--traditional, contemporary, ecclesiastical, social, and doctrinal--that require a biblical solution in a specifically African cultural setting. And finally, he proposes that these churches set forth a clear and unequivocal statement of their goals for ACT. Gehman's own general suggestion in this regard reads as follows:

Our primary goal in developing an African Christian Theology should be spiritual renewal among the churches and the building up of the Kingdom of God. (p.107).

In a short concluding chapter, Gehman highlights three aspects of a genuine "Africanized Christianity." It must be dynamically related to the problems and needs of everyday life; it must be firmly based on the Bible; and it must be made a necessary component of the mission of every African Christian church. Some of the specific examples here are somewhat repetitious of earlier material and would probably fit better anyway in one of the first two chapters where similar case studies are discussed. But the various observations and suggestions found in this section are valuable and ought to be carefully considered and acted upon. A fairly inclusive bibliography of works dealing with ACT rounds out this concise and constructive overview of the subject.

I discovered only one error of fact in Gehman's excellent presentation. This concerns my friend Martin Luther to whom the author attributes the following position:

Martin Luther and Melanthon (sic, i.e. Melanchthon) held that monogamy was not obligatory under every circumstance, that whatever was permitted by the law of Moses, remained lawful today (p.20).

In fact, Luther said just the opposite:

...a man is permitted to have only one wife. This is why Moses' law cannot be valid simply and completely in all respects with us. (p.291 of Vol. 46 of *Luther's Works*, the "American Edition" edited by R. C. Schultz, Philadelphia: Fortress Press.)

Other than a certain amount of repetitiveness in places and occasionally also some rather loose organization of material, I find this work to be one of the best critical treatments of the subject of ACT that I have read. Gehman offers many concrete examples to illustrate or support the various points that he seeks to make. His evangelical approach is irenic, but uncompromising, as far as the Scriptures are concerned. The book is also clearly written in a level of language that is appropriate for widespread use in English-speaking Africa (although the publisher should try to do something to improve the book's binding). It would admirably serve either as the principal text or as required background reading for any survey course offered at the advanced Bible school or seminary level.

I would now like to see an African response to this material, specifically with respect to Gehman's criticisms and assessment of the current state of ACT, and also in response to his proposals for setting the situation right by restoring the basis for Christian theologizing in Africa to a more solidly biblical foundation. And then that crucial last step remains, namely, for more evangelical African scholars--both Francophone and Anglophone--to take up Gehman's challenge to write their own evaluation of the current state of religious affairs and what they consider to be the pressing needs and central goals as far as the Church in Africa is concerned. It will be interesting as well as instructive to compare the action plan that they propose with Gehman's. In many crucial respects, this would undoubtedly be similar, and that is important for the maintenance of evangelical unity and constancy in the face of many sociocultural, theological, and even political threats to a forthright and faithful witness to the truth of the Word. But it would indeed be enlightening to observe and study any alterations of or additions to Gehman's recommendations, for these would represent a vital aspect of the ongoing development of "an evangelical perspective" in "Doing African Christian Theology."

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***The Theological Task Of The Church In Africa:
Theological Perspectives In Africa***

by Dr. Tite Tienou

(Africa Christian Press, 2nd edition , 1990) 56 pages.

With his informed insight of what the Christian Church in Africa ought to be doing theologically, Dr. Tite Tienou takes note of the contributions made so far. In suggesting a viable way forward, he not only points out certain mistakes that must not be repeated, he also critically, but constructively raises some important questions with which the Church in Africa must grapple. He lays a distinctive stress on African Christian leaders' responsibility to map out the future of theological content in the continent. In other words, he invites and encourages other concerned African Christian leaders to participate in wrestling with theological issues facing the Church today in Africa. The Church in Africa may be one of the fastest growing movements, but it is one of the weakest theologically.

Having pointed out the need for an evangelical theological strategy, and defined some key terms like "an evangelical," "theology," etc [pp. 9-13], he then attempts to describe and evaluate from within the purview of his Christian faith, what evangelical theological strategy in Africa has accomplished even before 1973; and what it ought to address since its genesis.

Missionary contribution to evangelical theology in Africa, according to Dr. Tienou, has not only been amateurish but it created an unnecessary evangelical fragmentation of which African Christians in main line churches have to see now as a major deterrence. The historical record of divided evangelicals in Africa served as a backdrop of the need for the formation of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar (AEAM).

As its name suggests, AEAM's multi-purpose encourages: a) the sense of satisfaction obtained from belonging, 2) relief from pressure by both leftist and rightist extremists, 3) exchange of ideas, 4) spiritual fellowship and cooperation, and 5) prevention of waste of money, time and personnel. Dr.

Tienou constructively critiques the intention of AEAM by pointing out that things were suggested on paper but without any practical implementation. Moreover, the group was concerned with only evangelism but not with theology. Thus the balance was lacking from the beginning.

The establishment of the historic Theology and Education Group under the Lausanne Committee worldwide in 1974 gave impetus to interest in and revival of evangelical theology in Africa. The late Dr. Byango Henry Kato, a Nigerian evangelical theologian, caught the vision and began to preach it with conviction across the continent and internationally. But the term 'African theology' was understood and described differently by different African scholars. Confusion in definitions resulted in African Christian leaders accusing each other either of 'liberalism' or 'conservatism' depending on one's position on the relation of pre-Christian African beliefs and Christianity. Some advocated for discontinuity while others saw an unbreakable continuity between the two. Therefore, such a disagreement resulted in a war of words which was then seen by some as an uncalled-for mudslinging among leading African Christian statesmen of the time.

Unlike his evangelical predecessors, Dr. Tienou sees an inseparable relation between Christianity and African culture. We are children of our own cultural background and evangelical history. In my own view, evangelical African theologians, before Dr. Tienou's book, had approached and addressed the issue of Christianity and African culture from a Western view. Dr. Tienou does well to listen to and summarize even African secular commentators on African life in general. He speaks like an African committed to Christ and God's written Word.

Having established the continuity rather than discontinuity of African culture in the context of expression of the Christian faith, Dr. Tienou, then, interacts with other African theologians in describing and defining things like African theology and contextualization. As an informed scholar, he critically evaluates what has been on the market on the same subject.

In a logical way, he then proceeds to pin point some of the threats to the theological task in Africa: mistrust, clericalism, a-historical faith, and denominational individualism. These are real threats to any progress in theological development in Africa--especially in regional contexts. Dr. Tienou's strength, as far as I am concerned, lies in his ability to give credit where it is

due, but subtly points out what still needs to be done in Africa theologically. He invites every reader to do something about constructing African theology even at a local church level.

Reading the book, by this African scholar and educator, is enough for anyone to start doing something about mapping the future of evangelical theology in Africa [pp. 45-56]. He creates in a reader a desire to do evangelical theology in and for his region. The book is a must for every evangelical Christian scholar or leader.

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