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# Evangelicalism and African Christian Theology

*Augustine C. Musopole*

The idea to write on this subject has been with me for some time now, but its urgency was brought about by the reading of Richard Gehman's book, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective*. However, it is one thing to have a thought and quite another to put it on paper in order to share it with a larger public, so the thought remained latent until I read a review of the book by Ernst Wendland in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 11.1, 1992. In the review, Wendland stated, "I would now like to see an African response to this material, specifically with respect to Gehman's criticism and assessment of the current state of African Christian theology (ACT), and also in response to his proposals for setting the situation right by restoring the basis for Christian theologizing in African to a more solidly biblical foundation." My initial intention to write was prompted by the important and courageous effort the book was attempting in determining the foundations for an ACT that was true

to scriptures and the Gospel, and by actually mapping out a method for achieving this. There were also things which I considered serious omissions in Gehman's consideration of a viable biblically based ACT.

## **Gehman's Contribution to ACT**

Most of the things that Richard Gehman has said in his book are not new. They have been articulated many times by African evangelical Christians at conferences, in books, *Afroscope*, and various journals. The concerns that he raises are not new either. The late Byang Kato articulated them vehemently when he was in office as General Secretary of AEAM [now the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, AEA], and his successor Dr. Tukurunboh Adeyemo has continued to do the same. The only new thing in his book is the proposed method for doing ACT from an evangelical perspective. Richard Gehman is to be commended, especially as a missionary, for recognizing and appreciating the need for an African

Christian Théology. While evangelicals in Africa have raised concerns about ACT and have responded to the perceived "theological pitfalls" through their published and unpublished works, and the establishment of two graduate schools of theology, at best they have simply reacted negatively and are not doing much theologizing that takes the African context seriously as does Dr. Gehman. One book which attempts to do this is Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa*, (Ghana: African Christian Press, 1973). The African evangelical theologians have left it to the so-called "liberals" in African universities departments of religious studies to carry on the task of contextualizing theology in Africa. Some of these scholars have no intention of adopting an evangelical perspective as a matter of commitment. Therefore, it is refreshing to find one who is concerned for the effective presence of an African evangelical theology as the mainstream theology in Africa.

Richard Gehman is to be further commended for realizing that imported theologies are not totally relevant to the African situation. He states, "To depend upon theological conclusions of another generation without seeking out the truth for oneself is to eat stale bread without proper nourishment." This means that even western evangelicalism

must come under the scrutiny of African evangelical theologians in their effort to make their theology relevant to the African context. It will be important to engage the hermeneutic of "new thinking" to avoid using stale theological bread and run the danger of "theological sickness" resulting in a nauseating or poisoned spirituality.

The criticism that Richard Gehman brings to bear on a select group of African theologians is not new. As he himself acknowledges, Byang Kato recognized the dangers and warned the African Church, especially its evangelical wing, in a way that was forthright and aggressive like an angry mother hen defending its chicks. While Byang Kato reacted most strongly to what he called incipient universalism arising out of perceived theological liberalism, John Mbiti, one of those attacked by Kato, has been critical of the lack of biblical usage in African theology. He has actually written a book to demonstrate how the Bible has to be used in the creation of contextual theology. It is wonderful to see more voices being added in addressing what is perceived to be a serious deficiency in the doing of African theology. What is needed is more evangelicals doing more biblically based African theologies by engaging in rigorous dialogue with all shades of theologies, and not simply decrying the fact that the so-called

"liberals" are not taking the Bible seriously. The counter charge is that evangelicals do not take either the context of the Bible or of the African believer seriously. The Bible is used as if it were a book of spiritual theorems that are applicable everywhere regardless of the cultural, social, economic, and political context.

One thing that needs to be acknowledged is that there is abuse (misuse, underuse, overuse) of the Bible by both "conservative" and "liberal" believers. I have put the terms conservative and liberal in quotes because their applicability in the African context is questionable. There is a tendency among those holding to what Gehman calls a high view of scripture to dehistoricize the Bible and to disengage it from living reality. It is called the over-spiritualization syndrome. The result is a people who live in a spiritualized world, but do not know how that world relates positively to their cultural context except through some negative attitudes. On the other end is the tendency to so historicize the scriptures as to deny its divine role as bearer of and witness to the divine Word, and the result is a sociology of religion and not theology, while spirituality is reduced to psycho-social well being. If African evangelicalism is to contribute to the correction of the situation, then it has to avoid these two

extremes. It seems to me that a dialogue within the African Church of theologians and lay people, and the sharing of their testimonies to the reality of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit is one way to avoid these abuses. This is also the way in which the African church can have a homegrown theology and not depend on stale theologies from elsewhere.

The emphasis that Gehman places on the doing of theology as a task of the whole church is most welcome, and especially the suggestion of a method that can make this happen. The tragedy of the African churches, of all theological complexions, is that very few, if any, have produced a confession in response to the question, What does it mean to be the church of God in Africa in the second half of the 20th century and beyond? The European churches emerged into their own particular identities by the confessions that they formulated in response to the theological challenges of their day. By inheriting these confessions, African evangelicalism has become unwittingly captive to western reformed scholastic theology. Without African-generated confession by the churches, the selfhood of the church will be impossible to realize. It can only be hoped that those who engage in theological discourse and writing are doing so out of their deep

commitment to and their love for the church in Africa and not simply out of intellectual curiosity and gamesmanship. The method advocated by Gehman will help, one hopes, to bring into the discourse both pastors and lay people and thus spread theological awareness far afield, rather than leave it to university and seminary professors. Having said this, it has to be acknowledged that it has been the nature of theological reflection that certain individuals contribute more than most. We have the example of Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, the Hodges, Mafhen, Barth, Tillich, Stott, Schaefer, Mbiti, Kato and many more. Individual contribution needs to be encouraged even as the churches set up theology work groups. It is hoped that these work groups will involve scholars who are already working in academic institutions. I do hope that many churches will take theology as seriously as they take evangelism, because they are two sides of the same coin. Perhaps if the missionaries had allowed the churches to do this from the very beginning as part of the selfhood of the church, some denominational splits might have been avoided.

## **Troubling Aspects of Gehman's Position**

### **(a) *Presuppositions***

There are certain things which I find troubling in Gehman's book because many of his assumptions are not stated and clarified. The first problem is that he has failed to follow his own observation that "the colonial context did not provide that encouragement to allow the Christian nationals to arrive at their own conclusions." Specifically it should be said that it was the missionaries who failed to permit African nationals to reach their own theological conclusions. Evangelicalism as a theological movement is not a product of Africa. It is a theological position which developed outside of Africa and was introduced to Africa as a new battlefield in the theological wars that had been raging in Europe and America for a long time between liberalism and conservatism in response to the Enlightenment. There is a history to the development of the evangelical movement in the West and in Africa. Within Africa there is need for a very clear distinction to be made between evangelicalism as the theological movement and the Evangel of Jesus Christ who is God's power and wisdom unto salvation. Even though the two might not be separated, they need to be

distinguished. The Evangel is primary and African evangelicalism is the tool of the Evangel and not the other way round. Without this distinction, it is easy to mix the two and to make the tool become the reality. It needs to be made clear here that the Evangel is none other than Jesus himself and not simply words about Jesus. Evangelicalism is historically an intellectual and theological movement which is contextual in character. Only the Evangel as the application of the reality of Jesus, the Christ, to sinful humanity is theologically universal. American evangelicalism or European evangelicalism or Asian evangelicalism can never be transferred to Africa, lock, stock and barrel, and be totally adequate for the African context. It is out of the incarnation of the Evangel within a cultural, sociological, and historical context that a local evangelical theology emerges. This distinction is not clear in Gehman's book. It is a distortion to confuse the means and the ends. It is simply assumed that evangelicalism as a theological system is universally applicable. Evangelicalism is only a means, but not the end, while Jesus as the Evangel is both the means and the end. It is the reality of Jesus in the lives and culture of Africans and as their way of salvation, and everything else following from this that makes African

Christian experience evangelical. Thanks be to God that He works in spite of our methods and systems.

*(b) The role of Scripture*

Following from this failure to clarify his assumptions is Gehman's position on Scripture. A further distinction needs to be drawn between a theology of the Bible and biblical theology. These two are not the same even though they imply each other. As it has been stated above the Bible has been abused by both conservative and liberal scholars because of the questions and presuppositions they bring to it and the attitudes with which they approach it. The theology of the Bible is what is said about the theological status of the Bible as to its message, authority, and authenticity; and Biblical theology is what the Bible teaches about God's relationship to humanity and all creation. This distinction is not clear in the book. What is disturbing is that, contrary to his method, the position that Gehman adopts regarding the Bible did not come out of his theological study group in Africa. In his guidelines, the first proposal on presuppositions which has to do with what is normative in theology is spelled out before a theological task force which will then state its presuppositions. Why do this critical work for them? Though Gehman might be right in what he has

said in his first proposition, he seems to be imposing a ready-made view on the African church. Somehow he seems not to trust the African church to come up with the right assumptions related to the theology of the Bible. The African people love and read their Bibles, and are capable of saying why they have to obey the Bible instead of other authorities. The view of biblical authority that Gehman presents is a statement out of the theological battles of Europe and America concerned with infallibility and inerrancy which arose out of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods. The African church has not talked about "inerrancy and infallibility" as yet, and there are other more pressing theological matters.

It is, therefore, interesting to note that while Gehman is willing to let the local church deal with the practical issues, he takes upon himself the responsibility of delineating the position that they need to take on the Bible as our authority. I think the African church should be left to determine what it thinks about the Bible as with any other problem that confronts it. For Gehman to define the theology of the Bible for the African Church is to act paternalistically. Without the African Christians establishing their own biblical foundation, an African evangelical theology will never emerge. We need to note here that Gehman's

position is a product of an epistemology which may not be biblical. Western evangelicalism shares to a large extent this rationalistic epistemological heritage with liberal theology, and it is this epistemology which has given rise to some theological problems and the resulting evangelical apologetics. The African church will have to deal with their epistemology in an effort to develop a theology of the Bible.

Is African evangelicalism right to insist on Scripture as the "final authority in matter of faith and conduct?" Is this not to put the vehicle in the place of the reality being conveyed by it? Jesus promised his disciples the Spirit of truth to lead them into all the truth and to bring to remembrance all the things that he had said. Jesus promised his presence to be with them to the end of the age. Jesus, the Word that is God, is the final authority in matters of faith and conduct and is the one who authenticates the scriptures and draws out their intention. The authority of the Bible is derived authority because it points to Jesus who is the author and finisher of our faith according to the writer to the Hebrews. Jesus told the Pharisees that they look to scripture for salvation, and yet they bear witness to him.

The question of authority comes from the dual needs for both a teaching

church and for a context for an African theology to develop. Yet, the Jerusalem Council remind us that biblical modification may be forced on Scripture because it has pleased the Holy Spirit and the African church to make appropriate changes to certain practices because Christ has made them clean. Pastoral letters cannot be used as proof texts without proper exegetical work, indeed as Gehman proposes, but in some cases fails to do in his book. Questions need to be asked as to what is the problem that led the apostles to place the emphasis on the need for "all scriptures". It needs to be remembered also that when those letters were being written, they were not yet part of the recognized canon, and so the scripture they refer to was the Old Testament. The epistles were important because of their apostolic authorship which the early church used to establish the canon. The repetition of doctrinal clichés that have come out of varied historical situations may or may not be helpful. African Christians need to find answers for themselves and this calls for a testing of all theological spirits to find out whether they are of Christ and relevant to the African context.

*(c) The Dangers of Epistemological Captivity*

It has already been pointed out that evangelicalism as arising from the West

has been shaped by an epistemological approach which is not simply evangelical, but Aristotelian in orientation and the result is a scholastic theology filled with paradoxes and dualisms. We have inherited that epistemological conditioning in Africa and there is need to recognize it for what it is: limited and inadequate for understanding both traditional African and Christian spirituality. African cultures that never recognized the dichotomy between matter and spirit, as the Greeks did, are much closer to the biblical epistemology based on the wisdom of God than Western evangelicalism steeped in rationalistic categories. Gehman seems to recognize this when he speaks on culture and the need for contextualization, but for the wrong reason. Western evangelical theology is caught in the same rationalistic trappings and reaction to philosophy and culture. This is why Gehman speaks about universal and propositional truths. Africans and the Bible have more ways of communicating truth than simply the propositional way which is more a legacy of Aristotelian syllogisms than biblical wisdom that uses narrative, prose, proverbs, ritual, symbols, parables and poetry. The truth of the Bible is captured better as the whole of being is tuned to God in a personal relationship and obedience, and not only



and simply by assenting to the truth of some statements, a method that has a tendency of freezing the truth and thus killing the life which it is supposed to convey.

The terms liberal and conservative need to be explained instead of being bandied around as if they were opposites. Unfortunately, the history of the usage of these terms have created this impression and led to their polarization. There are some things that need to be conserved, and there are other things that must change (become liberated). Change can be directed or it can be forced on a community. While confessions do not change, people do change and either outgrow or become fatigued by some issues. It may also be the case that some issues become irrelevant to the community or are overtaken by other events in the community. Therefore, there is the need for each generation to rethink the faith for itself in view of changed situations. While Jesus remains the same yesterday, today, and forever, the scriptures need to be interpreted afresh. In any society, there will be people who are always questioning the past and seeking to change it because it is in the way of new possibilities, just as there will always be people that work to conserve the past because the present and its meaning are rooted in it. What is required, is not to favor one or the

other, but rather to show wisdom and responsibility toward both. We cannot be beneficiaries of liberalism in some areas of our life and then vilify it as if it were the enemy without playing the hypocrite. Both theological perspectives have been hurtful to the African people. While liberal theologies encouraged colonialism, conservative theologies supported racism and still do to this day. Many of us would like to be set free from certain customs, traditions, and attitudes, while to conserve them would mean remaining prisoners of a past no longer necessary for the meaning of our present existence. ACT need not be either liberal or conservative, but theologically responsive to the reality of Jesus in the lives of African believers. To achieve this, it will have to be biblically based by use of adequate hermeneutic tools, contextually relevant in the problems it engages, culturally sensitive (but not captive) in its attempt to express the presence and meaning of the incarnate Christ. Furthermore, when we talk of liberalism in Africa and in ACT, we need to put it in its historical context, remembering that it was a reaction against a kind of obscurant spiritual authoritarianism that had grown out of a polemical situation following the Reformation. Theology is more than a science, it is an exercise in kinship with

God, the study of God. While it does not negate the use of reason as a tool, it recognizes its limitation because reason alone cannot understand both scripture and the power of God. Faith is not a leap into the dark, as Kierkegaard would have us believe, but out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Faith is reasonable and reason is faithbound, otherwise it has no grounds for confidence. The fact that rationalism has made claims beyond its own limits is no reason to vilify it, nor should it force theology to confine itself to its canons. It is as much a gift of God as faith, love, and hope are, but we know that love is the greatest and not reason. African evangelicals need to explore more this matter of love as related to God's wisdom as a possible epistemological point of departure for doing theology. Conservatives have tended to be narrow in their perspective because they do not take the whole existential and historical reality of our humanity in view, while liberals have tended to move to the other extreme in which anything and everything goes. For liberals a theological perspective governs the reality of God, and not God determining the perspective. What the African church needs is not an obscurant evangelicalism, but an African evangelical theology based on the love, wisdom, and power of God (and that is who Jesus is) and

theologians who embody that reality (doers of the word), which is, "Jesus in you, the hope of glory." For the African church, there is theological danger lurking in both liberal and conservative perspectives and African evangelicals need to watch both sides cautiously.

(d) *Living the Whole Truth*

The insistence by evangelicals that theology is a community effort is meant to provide for internal and mutual correction under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is the authority of the truth that we want, not of people's intellect or sectarian propositions. It is the truth that sets free and our loyalty should be to that truth as embodied and manifested in Christ and not simply to some confessional statements which soon become dead letters of the law. Hans Kung has advocated a church maintained in truth, and not on tradition--catholic or evangelical (I would highly recommend his little book to anyone concerned for evangelical theological orthodoxy and the church). We can only maintain an evangelical tradition because it upholds the truth as the church presently knows it and seeks to grow in it by embodying it. Therefore, doctrinal claims to biblical truth that have been developed elsewhere must come under scrutiny in the light of our unique experience of

Jesus Christ and historico-cultural context. Richard Gehman has put priority on "the spiritual renewal among the churches and building up the Kingdom of God." While I would applaud this emphasis, it is narrowly focused. It suffers from a Hellenistic dualism. There is the need for an African evangelical theology to be historically engaged. It is the whole gospel, to the whole person, in the totality of their culture, and for the whole world. It is the life of people that we should talk about, and not simply their souls or spirits. Until African people see the relevance of the Evangel to the redemption of their lives and culture, spiritual renewal will be ineffective. Social responsibility and evangelism are not alternatives, but each imply the other. African evangelicals need to emphasize both especially in view of Africa's cultural emphasis on communal living. The concern should be how can the Evangel contribute toward the creation of communities of freedom, peace, integrity and abundant life in Africa.

*(e) The Need for the Whole Tool-Box for Biblical Exegesis*

On the need for thorough biblical exegesis, Gehman has a point, but his tools are inadequate and so is the epistemological basis on which his argument rests. Evangelicals can use

all tools of biblical criticism and come to very different understanding from the liberals because their epistemology is different and their approach arises out of a personal relationship with the subject of the Word thus allowing for enlightened and informed subjectivity within the community of faith in theological discourse. While the Bible is significant due to Israel's election to be God's servant in mission to the world, the question of where was God before the Gospel reached Africa is critical to an African evangelical theology and it impinges on soteriology as well as the theological status of the ancestors. To bring in God from African traditional religion (ATR) is not to engage in natural theology because Africans do not recognize such a theology. If it has something to do with the God who is creator, then it is valid theology. Natural theology is a Hellenistic creation and deals with God who is a concept to be intellectually demonstrated or proved and not as a Being to relate to personally. To speak of God from ATR is not to substitute ATR for the Old Testament, but to understand and appreciate ATR better in the light of the Scriptures, hence Gehman is on target to advocate a theology of culture. The fact that there is an interplay between divine revelation and human progress through time in view of God's promised future implies

that there will have to be an interplay between biblical traditions and African religio-cultural traditions in discerning the meaning of God's word for Africa today. The Bible as a norm is not fixed or static, but rather creatively and incarnationally living and unfolding as applied by the Holy Spirit. It can only be fixed and inflexible if applied rationally.

bread called African evangelical/Christian theology.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted in a general way to highlight some of the issues that I consider critical in the development of African evangelicalism as mainstream African Christian theology. It is imperative that apart from the experience of Jesus as Savior and Lord, any theology that has come from outside has to be examined critically in the light of the Scriptures, as understood by the African community of faith, if it can make a positive contribution to the development of African Christian Theology under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The African church as a living reality cannot continue to live, as Gehman has rightly said, on stale theological bread without getting spiritually malnourished in the process. In many ways, it has been sick for a long time, and it is time to give to it some fresh homemade