

Book Reviews



Guidelines For Christian Theology In Africa

by Osadolor Imasogie

(African Christian Press, P.O Box 30, Achimota, Ghana,
1983) 86 pages, n.p.

Dr. Imasogie's book is a worthy contribution to the ongoing debate on contextualization of theology. He has said in an organised systematised form what some other African thinkers have been saying in fragmented form.

The book is divided into four chapters. In chapter one, the author demonstrates that though Christianity is a cosmic religion, it has always particularized itself within cultures (the primary one being Jewish, then Roman-Grecian) in order to be relevant. Therefore the task of every theologian in every generation, argues the author, is to communicate the gospel in the theologian's particular culture using the language, symbols and thought-forms that make sense in that culture. Both the divine source of theology and the temporal situation in which the eternal Presence must be discerned should be kept together in creative tension. To substantiate this point, the 16th century Reformation which gave birth to Protestantism was cited. Imasogie reasoned, and rightly so, that the Reformation raised not only doctrinal but also cultural questions. Before the Reformation, the author states, sadly without concrete examples: "Much of the history of Christian doctrine is a commentary on the struggle between Jewish thought patterns and the Greek world view vis-a-vis the existential apprehension of the Christ within these thought-patterns" (p.21). Failure to contextualize the Christian faith when it entered Africa has resulted in "many Africans not accepting Christianity completely as the all-sufficient religion that meets all human needs" (p.23). "The truth of this assertion is borne out by the fact that in times of existential crisis many respectable African Christians revert to traditional religious practices as the means for meeting their spiritual needs"(p.23).

In chapter three a good case is made for the failure of Western missionaries who brought the gospel to Africa to contextualize.

In fact, in many cases they dogmatized or absolutized their form of Christian doctrines. By and large, the author considers these missionaries as products of traditional western Christian theology (which he discusses in chapter two), which on the one hand, has failed to reconcile the basic Christian message with the contemporary self-understanding of human existence and on the other hand has de facto identified Christianity with the status quo. Beyond that however, Dr. Imasogie views the quasi-scientific worldview underlying the traditional Western theology as the greatest handicap of the Western missionaries when brought to another cultural context -- the Third World in general and Africa in particular.

By quasi-scientific worldview, the author means a by-product of the Enlightenment which at best accommodates faith to scientific materialism (a process whereby God was made an absentee Landlord of the universe) and at worst explains away the supernatural as mere superstition. At the time of the modern missionary movement (i.e. the beginning of the nineteenth century), Christian faith in the West has become merely only a thing to be believed and not experienced. Faith has been distilled into five ideas, namely: creation, God the Creator, freedom, immortality of the soul, and reward or punishment after death. "Other than these, such traditional Christian beliefs as the incarnation, divine activities in the world, as well as spiritual forces in general believed to be immanent on the earth, were considered obsolete in a world which had come of age"(p.49). "By the time Christianity was introduced into Black Africa in the fourth decade of the nineteenth century the worldview of the Christian theologian retained only a veneer of the biblical worldview" (p.52). Coming from such a background the early missionaries did not appreciate the African worldview that places a lot of emphasis on spiritual realities. Consequently the African perception and interpretation of the spirit world and the dynamic influences of spiritual forces on human existence especially with regards to crises were largely dismissed as primitive and superstitious. More unfortunate according to the author is the introduction of a strange God and of a Christ who could save from sin but who seemingly could not deliver from the demonic and anti-social forces. As a result of the sad ambivalent situation, the author concludes many so-called African Christians usually resort to traditional African religious practices

such as divination, sacrifices and wearing of protective charms or amulets in time of crises.

It is therefore imperative for every African theologian, concludes the author in his final chapter, to re-examine his theological presupposition and methodology. He argues that for any Christian theology to be relevant in Africa, account must be taken of the African worldview and the self-understanding of the African people. Before closing with three proposed guidelines, the author draws the reader's attention to what he calls "typical elements in African worldview and religion." Given the cultural complexities of Africa and the importance of worldview, the author's discussion here is unfortunately sketchy. Nevertheless, one cannot agree any less with the author concerning his proposed guidelines for theologising in Africa. He has called (1) for a new appreciation of the efficiency of Christ's power over evil spiritual forces; (2) for a new emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit and the present mediatory efficacy of the Living Christ; and (3) for a new emphasis on the omnipresence of God and the consequent sacramental nature of the universe. Excellent as these are, one is terribly disappointed at the author's failure to isolate a thorough study of Africa's cultural anthropology and sociology as part of a necessary prerequisite for theologising in Africa. Equally disappointing is the space given to the discussion of the guidelines - about six pages - though the book took its title from that topic.

Further, writing in 1983, one expects to find allusions to vital contributions being made by African theologians in the area of contextualization. The Authors silence seems misleading. One would have preferred an analysis of Allen Boesak's Black Theology and Black Power to the author's consideration of Juan Luis Segundo's Liberation Theology coming from Latin American context(see pp. 38-43).

There is the danger of "every" and "all" language that a theologian should avoid. The author runs into that quite often (e.g. first paragraph, p.41; second paragraph, p.64; first paragraph, pp.65,69). This tendency of generalization may also apply

to the main thesis of the book. While it is true lack of total commitment to Christ can be due to the gap between Christian theology and African life, it is not equally true that this is totally due to the failure of Western orthodox theologians to take African worldviews into consideration in their theological formulations. The parable of the sower and the soils of Matthew 13 should caution us from making a sweeping judgment.

Undoubtedly as a guide the book is a significant contribution to theologising in Africa. Dr. Imasogie's proposals demand our attention if Christian theology is going to be relevant in Africa. The book is well written, easy to read, but overburdened with unnecessary repetition. It is recommended for every Bible College library and theology class.

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History of the Church in Africa: A Survey
by Jonathan Hildebrandt
(Africa Christian Press: Ghana, 1981) pp 269, n.p.

The author of this book is no stranger to the field of African history per se or the history of the Church in Africa. He earned his MA in African history at Northwestern University, and did further graduate work at Columbia University and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In addition to these qualifications, Hildebrandt spent ten years teaching in African secondary schools and latterly, teaching Kenyan theological students in his capacity as principal of Pwani Bible Institute of the Africa Inland Church at Mombasa.

In developing his thesis, Hildebrandt adopts the horizontal method, i.e., he takes up his survey of the history of the church in Africa by time periods and further sub-divides the African continent into five main geographical areas. He follows the various developments in each of these areas and then leaves them

at the stage in which the close of that period finds them, to pick them up again at the same point in succeeding chapters to trace further development and thus brings us up to the present time. (It should be noted at the outset that this is a survey only).

From the preface and introduction we are able to glean that the book was written with a double purpose in mind; first, to "provide a basic outline of the history of the church in different parts of Africa," and secondly, "to demonstrate that Christianity is neither a recent arrival in Africa, nor yet some sort of religious import from the West imposed upon Africans by missionaries and colonial officials, but rather, a dynamic worldwide faith that has been a part of Africa for nineteen long centuries." Hildebrandt takes exception to some historians who see African church history as containing a series of disconnected events and chooses rather to emphasize the "continuity of the development" of the African church. If he means an historical continuity with the church of North Africa from A.D. 35 - 800, he failed in his quest, but if he means (as he really seems to) a continuity of fellowship, then, in this reviewer's opinion, he has succeeded quite admirably. We are reminded of the contributions made by those early Christians of North Africa in the fields of organization and forms of worship, to say nothing of the tremendous contributions to the church's understand of the truth by such men as Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine. The African church is the heir of these things in a special way, simply because these developments took place on African soil.

The book consists of thirty-three chapters. Chapters one through four introduce us to the African scene at the time of Christ, the planting of the church on North African soil, and its growth up until A.D. 700. Chapters five and seven give us a brief glimpse of the expansion into the upper Nile regions of Nubia and Ethiopia (Abyssinia) up to about A.D. 1600. Chapter six deals with the rise of Islam and the challenge it presented to the church and the latter's decline in the face of the Muslim conquests of this whole area. Chapter eight provides a sort of parenthesis between the previous chapters and those following in that it provides the reader with some idea of the religious controversies

of those early centuries out of which there emerged both good and evil - the church torn asunder by heretics and schismatics and yet great advance made in the church's understanding of the Scriptures. Modern African Christians are warned of the dangers and pitfalls of similar erroneous and heretical ideas being introduced into their midst today. In chapter nine the author provides us with a "time-line" of African church history from A.D. 100 - 1950. From this point on the North African church drops from sight only to be included in some statistical reports in the final chapter. The author now hurries us on to the introduction and establishment of Christianity south of the Sahara. Chapters ten and eleven recount briefly the attempts of the Portuguese to establish missions along the coasts of west and east Africa in those areas which would eventually become the colonies of Angola and Mozambique. Chapters 13 - 26 introduce us to the beginning of the modern missionary movement and bring us up to the period of rapid church growth ending with 1914 and World War I. Fleeting glimpses are given of the slave trade, the scramble for colonial possessions on the part of European powers, the reaction between white settlers and missionaries - not always a happy relationship - some outstanding missionaries and explorers and church planters, both Western and African, i.e., Livingstone and Samuel Crowther. A short evaluation of the period between 1878 and 1914 is given in chapter 27. From this point on to the end of chapter thirty-two, Hildebrandt deals with the movement toward full church autonomy from the various parent mission bodies along with a few glimpses of the rise of African Independent churches. The struggle for and realization of political independence and its effect upon the church comes in for consideration here as well. The closing chapter (33) provides some statistics of the African religious scene up to 1976, together with the number of languages of the various African nations and the degree to which the Bible has been translated.

Despite its relatively small size the book has a number of excellent features. Included among these are the "time-line" mentioned earlier, and the series of well-illustrated maps and their inserts. These two items are almost worth the price of the book itself. Sources are given in footnotes and quite a selective bibliography. One is pleased, also to find a very complete

index for quick references. Attached to each chapter are a number of questions and aids for further study.

The book has some definite weaknesses as well. One of these has to do with the author's style. The book is structured in such a way that it lends itself to the give and take of classroom procedure. In several places this does not make for either smooth reading or continuity of thought and tends to lessen the objectivity of the work. There is a strong tendency to moralize in places and at times it becomes "preachy", particularly in chapter eight. The style also gives rise to a number of repetitions and redundancies, colloquialisms and footnote errors. Here and there some misspelled words occur. More careful editing would have prevented these things from happening. One personal complaint is this: since African Independent churches form a considerable part of the modern church situation here in Africa, a separate chapter, or a least a sub-section on this phenomenon would have been helpful.

Most of the above defects are of minor importance and do not destroy the real value of the volume. It serves well the aims of the author. Moreover, it should remind us all, that though the church seems firmly planted in the rich soil of Africa the task is far from completion.

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Quest For Authority
by Norvald Yri
(Evangel Publishing House, 1978) 376 pages, n.p.

Dr. Norvald Yri's book, Quest For Authority, is one I would call a pregnant book because of the quantity and depth of material in it. He tackles the issue of the authority of Scriptures, among churches and missions, with primary emphasis on both the

ecumenical and evangelical view of Scripture. His primary purpose is that those in either camp who read this book will be encouraged to "hold to the authority of Scripture and thereby guard its peace and purity, and its unity and mission,"(p. 15).

The book consists of six chapters with the first chapter setting the stage and the sixth chapter forming the conclusion -- the evangelical affirmation of biblical authority. Chapters two through five form the body of Dr. Yri's presentation. The material in these chapters is treated in a scholarly format:

Historical review
Theological development
Quest for religious authority
Summary

The summary, in particular, is excellent for this type of scholarly work. It is given as statements summarizing what has been discussed under the historical review, theological development and quest for religious authority. This is very helpful to those who find the material hard to read and difficult to grasp. In a sense the summary section brings into focus the issues. The book clearly shows that the World Council of churches has increasingly substituted an economic and political theology for the Word of God. The documentation is quite impressive.

The authority of Scripture is quite evident in all chapters, especially in chapter six, where Dr. Yri states that ". . . all Scripture is inspired by God and has authority We believe that the biblical record reveals what God actually wanted to say to fallen mankind. He wanted to reveal his will touching man's salvation, and he did. He wanted to show how man could be saved, and he did. . . . We cannot agree that the fallible human beings and ambiguous human languages make it impossible for an all powerful God to communicate to mankind His ultimate will in understandable words. "(p.244)

I would strongly recommend this as good reading for Bible school and theological students and a must for every library.

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Ecclesiastes
by Michael Eaton
Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, (IVP, 1983) 159
pages, 3.95.

"That's a hard book." "I don't read it very often." These were typical comments which were made when friends found me reading a commentary on Ecclesiastes. It's reputation of pessimism and scepticism make it seem not quite Christian. So it is all the more important that we now have this commentary in a series whose concern is "to get at the true meaning of the text and make its message plain."

At the outset Michael Eaton recognises that the God-oriented realism of the Preacher is the only remedy for the pessimistic cynicism and despair that is so widespread.

The introductory articles, as well as covering pertinent critical matters, set the book in its original context and so lead the way to an understanding of its message.

The first section concerning the Hebrew text of the book, shows from a survey of the various versions and their general agreement with the Massoretic text that it has been well preserved. There has been considerable discussion as to the date of the book, much of it revolves around the interpretation of linguistic data. What is the significance for dating of Aramaisms, or of Canaanite-Phoenician influence? This data does not lead to a reliable date. Nor are arguments from Greek influence any more certain. All that can be said is that the date must be left undecided. On the question of authorship he concludes that an "editor-author", calling himself 'Qoheleth' (the Preacher), is reporting in his own words the teaching of a revered wise man.

The association of the book with Solomon clearly expedited its acceptance as part of the Old Testament canon. When questions were raised about this (often because of its internal contradictions), they were concerning why it was canonical; that it was part of the canon was taken for granted.

Ecclesiastes is a good example of a style of near eastern wisdom literature which he calls "pessimism literature." Parallels with the wisdom literature of surrounding nations are not evidence of dependence, rather these techniques and materials were used and developed into distinctive forms that were able to express Israel's faith in God. In his wide survey of material his comments were occasionally superficial. For instance, the story of the noble and the servant (p.35) is given as an example of pessimism, whereas Derek Kidner's treatment brings out its cool and witty cynicism (A Time To Mourn and a Time To Dance pp.19-20).

What are we to make of this book? For von Rad it is a bitter marginal note to the wisdom tradition with no unity of thought. For Eichrodt it is a profound meditation on the power of God in creation. For Gordis it is a monument of man's striving after the good life. There are almost as many opinions as commentaries. Part of the problem is that wildly different moods and seemingly sheer contradictions are set unashamedly side by side. Is it a unity, were there many writers, or were the pages on which it was written mixed up at some stage? The different views about the Preacher seem endless. Michael Eaton discusses this 'enigma' in order to raise two important questions.

First, is there material inserted into the book? Evidence for this is claimed for editorial and contradictory passages. These are examined and judged as unlikely, with the further confirmation that the vocabulary and thinking of these disputed sections as 'remarkably similar' to that of the rest of the book.

The second is the more important question. Is there an overall coherent purpose? The answer given is that it is an essay in apologetics which defends the life of faith in a generous God by pointing to the grimness of the alternative. But instead of developing this we are introduced to some of the themes of the book; the heaven-earth dichotomy, the relationship with the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the limit set to wisdom and the significance of certain curious omissions. In the last short paragraph of this section he alludes briefly to the purpose, but Eaton does not show clearly what he means by the

life of faith, it is only in the latter part of the commentary that it finally emerges that what is being referred to is a life lived in trust and dependence upon God. This section is helpful as regards the book's themes; however, a clearer statement of the purpose (on p. 55) is that the Preacher commends "a God-centered life by presenting a critique of all forms of secularism."

The question of structure has resulted in as many divergent views as the other matters discussed. However, enough indication is found of an objective progression to enable a fairly detailed outline to be suggested, while recognising that there is often only a loose coherence within and between the sections.

The commentary itself consists of a detailed verse by verse examination of the text to bring out the "true meaning." This is done with fine scholarship, though Bible students who are looking for help in understanding the message of Ecclesiastes will be in danger of missing the wood for the trees. Nevertheless there is a great deal to be learnt. The futility and meaninglessness of life lived without God is emphasised throughout, together with the corollary that contentment and joy are only possible when God is acknowledged and trusted.

The first part is rather straightforward; contrasting the failure of secularism, wisdom and pleasure-seeking, and the despair of the certainty of death, with the alternative of faith in God. The poem in chapter three is seen in terms of God's providence rather than of the relentless inevitability of time. The bulk of the book (chapters four through ten) is described as groups of sayings clustered around particular themes. In an important insight he sees the sayings, which many have taken as puzzling contradictions or insertions, to be presented first from the viewpoint of "under the sun" and then from the viewpoint of faith; most notably for the crux of chapter eight, verses twelve and thirteen. The final part (before the epilogue) is seen as a sustained call to faith with the decay portrayed in chapter twelve stressing the urgency of the decision.

At times his reasoning is unconvincing, as at the bottom of page 117 where the parallelism of thought is too vague to support his point. On page 125 the short second paragraph is

misplaced, it belongs with the following section. There is more transliteration of Hebrew than is usual for Tyndale Commentaries, the policy stated in the general preface is that words are transliterated where necessary; in many cases the argument would be as clear without the Hebrew, in some a knowledge of Hebrew is demanded in order to grasp the point being made (e.g. page 22 line 14 and page 42 line 2 from the bottom). So it is unfortunate that the diacritical marks are frequently missing or wrong.

This is a valuable commentary that is very useful in discovering the meaning of the text, though since the overall message is often obscured by the fine attention to detail, it would be helpful to read Derek Kidner's exposition *A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance* as its complement.

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Numbers - An Introduction and Commentary
by Gordon J. Wenham
Tyndale Old Testament Commentary
(Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, England, 1981) pp.240

If the purpose of a commentary is to make available information and meaning which most Bible students never have the time or skill to attain otherwise, then Dr. Wenham has helped us greatly. Dismissing fanciful interpretations made by commentators desperate to make the Old Testament relevant today, Wenham's exegesis draws on a wide range of historical and textual scholarship. Most critical information is placed in footnotes or appended note sections. This arrangement allows for a thorough discussion that moves quickly and easily.

"The theme of the book of Numbers is the journey to the promised land of Canaan." The author effectively introduces and reviews major themes and literary structure throughout his exegesis, giving the reader the needed sense of continuity. This context consciousness is especially important for this book because of its "insistence on organization, ritual and hierarchy." Reviewing is also important for grasping an overall perspective

a book which has been referred to as "the junk room of the priestly code."

The introduction, while following a conventional format (i.e. Title and Contents, structure, sources, date and authorship), is largely the place where the author brings the reader to face the difficulties and confusion which surround the book of Numbers. His two major concerns in the introduction seem to be; (1) the proposition of the structure, both of the book and its relationship to Exodus and Leviticus, and (2) the significance of ritual and how to interpret its meaning.

The book of Numbers cannot be understood apart from Exodus and Leviticus. Israel's history is interpreted as cynical, and Numbers contains two of the three cycles which began in Exodus. Each of these cycles ends with important eras of revelation at Sinai, Kadesh, and the plains of Moab. Within this literary structure for the interpretation of historical events, Dr. Wenham understands the meaning and continuity between the law and travelogue of Numbers.

These cycles are meant to be compared and contrasted. Wenham uses this key to unlock much understanding about the theology of Numbers. Thus, by comparison we are meant to see that the refusal to enter Canaan from Kadesh was as blasphemous as worshipping the golden calf at Sinai or Baal in the plains of Moab. Wenham warns against supposing that such a literary device distorts history by being synthetic. The honesty of biblical records is attested to by the inclusion of material which does not fit the cyclical scheme exactly.

"Rituals reveal values at their deepest level." With this Wenham introduces what has been for him a breakthrough in understanding the significance of Old Testament society and theology. He admits modern man's aversion to ritual or liturgy. For this and other reasons, the Old Testament ritual and sacrificial system are largely undiscussed. Wenham continues to explain in his introduction the essence of ritual as a two sided form of communication; "Everyone involved had to play his own role on a public stage under the eyes of man and God." Far from being

dry, the author's discussion is intriguing and challenges the reader to follow down a mysteriously ancient path. The path to understanding is beset with major problems of interpretation. Biblical rituals are "so rarely explained in the Bible, or so briefly that several interpretations are possible." Just when the path seems darkest and unknown, light comes from an unexpected source -- anthropology. Wenham explains how methods of investigation and interpretation developed by social anthropologists can be applied to the records we have of the ancient Israelite society. These methods help the student to examine the ritual and symbolic system as a whole. "It is the contrasts (the distinctions and gradations) between similar elements within the system that are of primary importance, not the individual elements in it." With this introduction, Dr. Wenham pursues an intriguing and scientific exposition of the book of Numbers. He admits this approach is so new as to be "tentative" and leaves its merit to be born out by the fruits of understanding. In chapter six Wenham compares the restrictions and sacrifices of the Nazarite with the high priest and learns that while the prerogatives are not the same, their comparative holiness is equal. Thus the depth of the Nazarite vow strikes us. This is one example of the fruit of Wenham's attempt to apply anthropological methods in his exegesis.

The author's analysis of Numbers, conforming to the cyclical structure he proposes, divides the book into five major sections with thematic subsections. All of these generally follow the chapter divisions of the Bible. These chapters are then divided for the purpose of exegetical discussion. Wenham does not generally divide as far as verse by verse exegesis, but discusses meaningful sections of material. Wenham's style of exegesis by section, whether twenty verses or two, presents detailed material without fragmenting it excessively. The result is the sense of having a detailed understanding of the whole picture.

There is no devotional or personal application in this commentary. It is not written as a sermon. But at the end of most chapters the author notes the relationship between the passage discussed and the New Testament. In this way he points to the relevance of Numbers in our new covenant relationship,

encouraging the reader toward personal application.

Studying this commentary also sheds light on the New Testament. Understanding the meaning of the separation and holiness of the Nazarite vow, that the vow could not be forsaken to take care of a dead relative, one can appreciate Jesus' concern for the holiness of being his disciple when he said, "Let the dead bury their own dead." (Matthew 8:21-22). Wenham's commentary on Numbers is an excellent tool for continuing our understanding of the New Testament Scriptures.

Wenham's exposition and theology of the book of Numbers is a much needed contribution to the understanding of this ancient and mysterious canonical literature. It's brevity should not restrict its use by either the scholar (by being too simple) or the layman (by requiring too much background). It is well written and draws the reader into the study of Numbers, even into further study. It offers much in carrying on the fine tradition already established by the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.

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Calvin's Doctrine of Atonement
by Robert A. Peterson
(Presbyterian and Reformed Pub., 1983) pp. 113, \$4.95

This well written book is going to be a boon to biblical pastors and students. Dr. Peterson has not only drawn on his personal reading of Calvin but also made extensive use of selected theologians. His simplicity of style and brevity make for easy reading. The numerous footnotes, extensive bibliography and indexes enhance the usefulness of this reference work.

The starting point of the book, as with Calvin's theology, is the free love of God in Jesus Christ. This free love of God is "both an adjective describing the sovereignty of God's love and a noun depicting His lovingkindness (p.3). Peterson clearly draws out the love/wrath dilemma of God's righteous