

THE CHALLENGE OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA TODAY¹

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Introduction

The church in Africa is standing at a very critical point. A tremendous trust is being placed upon our shoulders by the Lord. We need to be prepared for all that the Lord is calling us to be and to do in our own generation and for the generations that will follow us. This situation was emphasized several years ago in the founding in Scotland of a specialized centre for the study of Christianity in the non-Western world. At the opening ceremonies, its director, Professor Andrew Walls, gave this remarkable explanation:

The centre was started because the churches of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific are now central to the Christian faith, and lie at the heart of most questions about the present and future of Christianity.

Indeed, missionary research now clearly indicates that the centre of gravity for Christianity is shifting away from the west to Africa and to Asia. This being the case, is it not crucial for the future of Christianity that our churches in Africa recognize and begin to prepare now for their critical role and responsibility? The western world has left its mark on Christianity for centuries--for better or worse--and it appears to be the turn now of Africa and Asia to influence world Christianity for a considerable time to come. I believe, under God, that we Christians of Africa in this generation are going to have the privilege, and the responsibility, to help shape the image of world Christianity both now in our own day and for the generations ahead.

We all have an unfortunate tendency to be parochial and to limit our considerations to our own churches or denominations. But what is facing us is nothing parochial. The Lord is presenting us in Africa with an important task, and we must begin to prepare ourselves in fear and trembling for this great trust. We need to commit ourselves afresh to the Lord for him to do with us what he wants, to shape us in such a way that we become channels that he can use to bless his church both in Africa and throughout the world. This is the challenge that faces us in this day and generation. I find it exciting, but I also find it humbling.

If we are going to play this active role, we must be clear about a number of things. There is an African proverb: "You cannot give what you do not have." It is important for our churches to discover their own identity within the worldwide fellowship of God's people, if they are to contribute responsibly to the life and mission of the church in the world. That is the challenge facing all of us who are called to be servant-leaders in the church in Africa today!

The whole question of spiritual gifts is not just an individual thing. It is not just "my" gifts which need to be discovered and put to use. It is also "our" corporate gifts which need to be discovered and put to use. The church of Jesus Christ in Africa has particular gifts as a result of the way God has dealt with us in our historical and cultural context. There are insights that we can contribute to the world church that nobody else is fitted to contribute in the same way as we are. Let us review some of the areas where the African church has distinctive contributions to make for the renewal and enrichment of the universal church.

Integration of Reality

Most western Christians have a real struggle with a dichotomy between the spiritual and the material. In their strongly materialistic context, it takes a conscious effort to think themselves into the spiritual world of the Bible. This fact inevitably colours to some extent their understanding and interpretation of the Scriptures. By contrast, most African Christians live in the awareness of the unity of reality, material and spiritual, and of man's relationship both to God and to one's total environment.

You and I often read the Scriptures without batting an eye, since there is a natural integration in our minds between the material and the spiritual. The situations that Jesus was dealing with in Palestine seem so close to us. When the Lord deals with an epileptic boy showing all the classical symptoms of epilepsy, and begins by rebuking the devil before he goes on to heal the child, we know what Jesus was doing because in our own cultural context we would ask the same questions. We would not just be thinking about the physical symptoms of epilepsy. We would be going behind the symptoms and finding out what was at the root of this particular manifestation of epilepsy. It was the same with the Lord, who knew that the spiritual and the material were completely integrated, and dealt with the situation with that in mind.

Now the classical western mind doesn't do that. Many of our friends from the west, who perhaps have not had the privilege of living in Africa for very long, when they read the Scriptures must make an effort to think themselves into that Scriptural world before it begins to make sense. This fact colours their understanding and interpretation of the

Scriptures. Having constantly to make a conscious effort to think yourself into the biblical world, with its integration of the spiritual and the material, sometimes filters out certain aspects of the truth, which are then lost in the interpretation of that particular situation in Scripture.

By contrast, most African Christians live in an awareness of the unity of reality, both the seen and the unseen. This fact was noted by several speakers at the Third World Theologians Consultation held in Seoul, Korea, in 1982. "The context and backgrounds in which God's Word came to man in biblical times are very similar to the life situations in Asia today," stated Dr Saphir Athyal of India. And Dr Tokunboh Adeyemo of Africa made the following observation: "Our investigation reveals that African history and cultural complexity have a lot in common with the Bible world, a fact which makes the construction of theological bridges easier for us." This cultural facility which the Lord has given to us in Africa of being able to naturally integrate the material and the spiritual equips us to bring insights in our understanding of the Scriptures which we are responsible to share with our brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world.

In an unpublished paper given at the 1983 Wheaton Conference on the Nature and Mission of the Church, Dr Paul Pierson anticipated the growth of the whole church in its understanding of the Good News:

Our mono-cultural Western understanding of the Gospel has usually been overbalanced on the side of the cognitive, while neglecting and fearing the aspects of power and conflict in the biblical message. We may be restored to balance when elements which our post-Enlightenment mentality has filtered out of the Gospel are rediscovered through our brothers and sisters of other cultures. These will, no doubt, include a greater focus on *koinonia* of heart and life, simplicity of life-style and worship, the active power of God working here and now in human life, and the natural integration of concern for physical need with the sharing of the Gospel.

This trust which the Lord has given us in Africa at this particular time is to be put to good use. We need to remember that since culture is not static, but dynamically changing all the time, in two or three generations we may no longer be in a position to share these insights, as urbanization and secularization progress on our continent. Because of the present context in which we live, we of this generation of Christians in Africa have unique insights to contribute for the enrichment of the world church.

Community Consciousness

A second contribution we in Africa are gifted to make by virtue of our life situation is in the area of community. Among Christians worldwide a renewed emphasis is being given to the local church as the community of God's people who live, worship, witness, serve together and care for one another in a particular setting.

The clearest manifestation of such a caring community was the early church in Jerusalem. On the day of Pentecost, when the disciples and those who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ were baptized and were all together under the apostles' teaching, not only were they sharing in the fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer, but also they were caring for one another's needs. In this early Christian community they had eyes to see one another's needs and used their resources to meet those needs. They were a manifestation of what Jesus Christ expects his church to be.

Of particular relevance is the corporate witness of each believing community in its own society. Paul referred to the local church in Corinth as a "letter of Christ, known and read by all men" (2 Cor 3:2). Those who will not bother to read the Scriptures should be able to read what they see in the community of God's people, and from seeing that, be drawn to the Lord. In Revelation the Lord referred to the local churches in Asia Minor as "lampstands". By their distinctive quality of corporate life and relationships, they were to be his worthy light-bearers in the society where he had placed them. Any community of God's people will effectively reflect the love, holiness and power of Christ to the world, by the extent to which they themselves are subject to his lordship and obedient to his Word. This is why demonstrating Christian community is very important. We are to incarnate the truth that we proclaim, the love of Christ which we preach and the righteousness of the Lord we represent.

We here in Africa are blessed with a profound sense of community. We live in close-knit families and communities, which are an essential part of our culture. Admittedly some of us who live in urban areas are often suspicious of our extended families, particularly when they are regularly visiting us! You complete your training and find yourself posted to the capital city--and all of a sudden the extended family descends on you there, to stay in your one-roomed apartment! But there are positive aspects to the extended family that the church of Jesus Christ is called upon to rediscover and use for the benefit of the church. There is no such thing as individualistic Christianity. The Lord intends to set the solitary in families (Ps 68:6). We may be converted as individuals, but we are then incorporated into the family of God where we have many brothers and sisters. One of the joys of those of us who travel so much in Christian ministry is the opportunity to experience the reality of

truly having brothers and sisters in the Lord everywhere we go. Christian fellowship can sometimes be warmer than blood relationships!

In the West by far the majority of people live in the cities and, as a result of the industrial revolution, individualism with all its related problems is the main way of life. The nuclear family is the basic unit of society there, but often even that is now breaking down. We know that the extended family in Africa also has its problems, but being part of it also has considerable advantages. In my language there is no word for cousin. The children of my parents' brothers and sisters are all my brothers and sisters. If I visit my extended family in Ghana, the home will be full of children all calling me Dad. (I doubt I would be able in every case even to tell whose children belonged to which brother! But fortunately I am not supposed to be able to!).

Until very recently there were no orphans in Africa. In many African languages there was no such word as "orphan", because if parents die there are plenty of mothers and fathers in the extended family to look after such children. They are not orphans. Many families did not even give surnames from the father or the mother to the children. They gave names of other senior members in the extended family, in order to impress upon the children that the nuclear family unit is only an element of the bigger unity in the extended family. By the grace of God we Christians in Africa find ourselves with this kind of facility which we did not create. What insights into God's plan for the church are thereby granted us for sharing with the larger body of Christ?

The Christian church is in fact one big extended family of God. The thing about the extended family, particularly when it is practised in its pure form, as it still is in rural areas of Africa, is the care and concern which is lavished on you. At the same time there are checks upon you and responsibilities which you have to carry. These things can be reflected in the church of Jesus Christ. Our love for one another in the church should keep us from living in an individualistic way, and bring us to live for one another as members of an extended family. I think it was John Mbiti who said that whereas the European says, "I am because I think" the African says, "I am because we are." The African defines himself in terms of the community. His own identity is rooted in an awareness of the community of which he is a part. As we live in our extended families with their privileges, disciplines and responsibilities, we have insights which we can contribute to the church of Jesus Christ.

In the highly individualistic world in which most western Christians live and work, the experience of Christian community is often limited to the carefully structured activities of Sundays, and sometimes to just one service on a Sunday. This becomes for them the only opportunity to express and experience Christian community. For the rest of the time

they pursue their individualistic ways. But the African is always surrounded by others.

The people of the Bible also lived in extended families like we do. This is true both of the Old and of the New Testaments. The theological bridges are already there for us. We do not need to make a somersault trying to think our way into what is really being said in those parts of Scripture. So much of what is written in Scripture refers to the same kind of context as that in which most of us presently live. You will find that commentators from the Western world have a tendency to interpret Scriptures individualistically because of their own background. For example, when Paul says in Ephesians 6 to put on the whole armour of God and to stand firm, he was calling the whole Christian community to stand together as one man. The western commentator is tempted to apply the passage to the individual, but there was no question in Paul's mind of individuals trying to go it alone in such matters. The Pauline churches were to "stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the Gospel" (Phil 1:27). We who live in community can have insights that enable us to bring out enriching interpretations from the Scriptures to share with our brothers and sisters everywhere. Our background should be exploited in the Lord to bring out the full meaning of God's Word for our larger family worldwide.

Powerlessness and Power

The entrance of the Gospel into Africa through the modern missionary movement coincided with the spread of western colonial power and commerce in the same regions. It is not difficult therefore to see how Christianity came to be identified in the minds of many of our people with western culture, power and money. You mention Christianity and it seems to them that this involves becoming like a western person. Christianity and western culture are for them so closely aligned that it is difficult for them to distinguish which is which. Sadly, far too many of the missionaries shared this same mistaken view, proven by the fact that, on the whole, they did not expect the national Christians to participate in carrying the Good News to other peoples beyond their own borders. Western culture, power and money seemed to be necessities if you were to take up the work of an evangelist.

But from the beginning it was not so. This identification between material power and missions arises from mistakes made by modern western Christianity in its recent missionary outreach. But we need to go back to the beginning of Christianity to find out how things were meant to be. And we find this. Jesus Christ came to establish a kingdom not of this world. The power of the kingdom was not military might, nor commercial or economic power, but rather the power of the Holy Spirit. "Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, says the Lord" (Zech 4:6). This is why Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem so that they could

be clothed with power from on high. They obeyed, and began to experience what their risen Lord can do in the power of his Holy Spirit. By their witness in the power of the Spirit, the Gospel rapidly spread out into the world. In Luke's recounting of these events in Acts, he is especially intent on making the point that it was from a position of weakness that the Gospel moved forward and captured the places of power and influence for the Lord Jesus Christ. That power has not lessened today. It is by that same power that the Gospel is to be spread across all barriers today, to men and women who are still sitting in darkness and under the shadow of death.

We spend today more than £90 million a year in mission work. With that kind of capital many multi-nationals would have possessed the world if they also had the kind of manpower that the church has today! Why is it that at the close of the twentieth century nearly two-thirds of mankind are still waiting to hear the Good News? The message of eternal life has been entrusted to us for nearly two thousand years, but the majority of people living in our world today do not know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. We cannot say that they have rejected the Gospel. They have not heard it. We who by historical circumstance have been servants, former colonial servants, who still today have no economic power, no influence in the councils of the world, but who have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, can we not prove again in this generation that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who will believe? Is it beyond him to do again today through African Christians what he did through the early church? It was done in that day not by power nor by might but by the Spirit of God. And of them it was said, not by their friends but by their enemies, "These men have turned the world upside down."

If we are servants, weak and penniless and powerless, and know it, and cast ourselves upon the resources of God, there will suddenly come into play an aspect of the Gospel which has not been seen for a long time. Men and women will begin to see the power of the Gospel as they have never seen it before. Paul Pierson has rightly observed:

It is worth noting that during the first three centuries of the Christian era, the Gospel was taken primarily by those who were seen as politically and economically powerless, to the centres occupied by the powerful--from Jerusalem, the colony, to Rome, the metropolis. This was appropriate, since the message told of God who had, in his incarnation, emptied Himself of divine prerogatives, lived as a servant among us, and gone to a cross.

Let us who by circumstance are servants, in the sense that we have no power, submit ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and bring again into sharpest focus a demonstration of the power of the Gospel. The Lord is

able through those who have no power humanly speaking, to take the Gospel to those places where power in the world's terms is to be found. To quote Paul Pierson again:

The non-Western movement with most of its missionaries coming from nations which are not perceived as powerful on the world scene, may make it easier for its recipients to hear the message of a Servant Lord who calls His followers to become servant-people. The self-emptying aspect of the Christian life might again be restored to its rightful prominence and replace the competitive individualism so characteristic of western culture and much of western Christianity. Perhaps when western technology and culture is less obvious, the power of the Gospel will be seen more clearly.

The Lord is not going to make the church in Africa rich so that we may have the privilege of doing missions. Many of the missionaries who brought the Gospel to Africa so many years ago set out with only a oneway ticket for the ship on which they travelled. They did not have bank accounts. All they had was faith in the One who was accompanying them. We are the products of that kind of venturesome faith, and the Lord did not disappoint them or we would not be here! That we are powerless materially is no disadvantage; it is in fact a qualification. Because of their resources, missionaries today from the west are often not taken seriously. People attribute mixed motives to their efforts. But if people see Africans reaching out to other cultures and planting churches while possessing nothing, the world will sit up and take notice. Mission born out of our weakness is that which the Lord is looking for as a contribution of the churches in Africa today. Are we able to rise up to that challenge, in the power of the Holy Spirit, or are we perpetually going to be beggars stretching out our hands to receive from our brothers and sisters from elsewhere, while we sit upon all the treasures that the Lord has given us?

Cross-cultural Mission

The realization that the responsibility for world evangelization belongs equally to the younger churches of the developing countries dawned with power on many of us for the very first time at the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization in 1974. There we began to learn that we also were expected to participate in taking the Gospel cross-culturally to those who have not heard. Some of us were astounded by this. We had thought that mission always had a white face. We thought its work-force always came from the sending countries of the western world to us in the receiving countries. We thought all we had to do was to receive. But now we were suddenly told we also were to be sending missionaries to other countries. It was a revolutionary concept for many of us.

Remarkable results have followed. In 1974 there were an estimated 3,000 missionaries from the non-western world working in cultures other than their own. Ten years later the number of missionaries from the non-western world had increased fivefold to 15,000. This new missionary work-force represented many different countries, including Nigeria, Brazil, Indonesia, Korea and India. It is estimated that now there are about 25,000 cross-cultural evangelical missionaries from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Pacific. The non-western missionary force now constitutes nearly one-fifth of the total evangelical mission force, and it is growing all the time.

That is how it ought to be. How is it that we were so slow to learn? We had been brainwashed by the wrong example. We only had to go through the book of Acts to see the way the apostle Paul selected men and women from among the younger churches he was planting, and then trained them as they travelled with him on his missionary journeys. Then, sooner or later, he would send them out to cultures different from their own to propagate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We had looked at the wrong model, and now we are being forced to look back at the original.

It is in the area of cross-cultural mission that the churches of Africa may yet prove to make their most important contribution to world Christianity, as over the next decades they send willing workers to carry the Good News cross-culturally to people who are yet unevangelized. Against the background of the massive defections from organized Christianity in the west, due to the inroads of secularism, materialism, humanism and Marxism, the church in the third world meanwhile has grown from 83 million in 1900 to an astonishing 634 million in 1980--according to the research of David Barrett. We must plead with the Lord of the harvest to call and send forth into the missionfields many sons and daughters of Africa. If mission work is to be done by the power of the Holy Spirit, and not by the power of money or by any other influence, then we should pray that the Lord will send out missionaries from Africa in ever-increasing numbers to other parts of the world where the Gospel has not yet made an impact.

I think of Rev Okeke from Nigeria. He was sent by his church in Nigeria to England as a chaplain to Nigerian students in the universities. When he arrived he realized his calling was not primarily to Nigerians at all. He did what he could to help the Nigerians, of course, but most of his ministry has been among British people. He has seen so many Britons converted to Jesus Christ. Recently when he was to return to his church in Nigeria, there were many people who wished that he could stay longer in Britain, for a great door of opportunity had been opened up to this servant of the Lord. There were many adversaries indeed, but there was a tremendous harvest reaped while he was there conducting weekend missions in local churches and seeing pastors and church leaders and others converted to Jesus Christ. We have been given tremendous

spiritual resources for mission and we dare not hide them or bury our talents in the ground.

Many Brazilian missionaries have taken the Gospel back to Portugal where their colonial masters came from. You and I can do the same thing, taking the Gospel to those places which brought it to us. The church of Jesus Christ in the third world at this present time has greater spiritual vitality than the churches in the western world have ever had during this century. Even though we are materially weak and poor, the church is strong spiritually. You may not think so, but when I travelled for the Lausanne Committee I would return to Nairobi very discouraged about places in Europe where the church seemed to be dying out. You come back into Africa and enter into a vital worship service, and your spirit is lifted up even if the church is being persecuted.

Recently I made several missionary visits to Germany, where I was privileged to be preaching in the very places from which the Basel missionaries came who first brought the Gospel to my people in Ghana. There I saw some of the graves of those who had translated the Scriptures into my language. I thank the Lord for them. I found myself in the pulpits of their own home churches, preaching to the people of Germany today the same Gospel that these German believers had heard in the last century and responded to. Once converted, they were challenged to bring the Gospel to us in Africa. And there was I, an African, calling their grandchildren's generation back to faith in Jesus Christ. That is what we are being called to do in this generation. We who know the Lord Jesus Christ in Africa today are under new and special obligations. The challenge to Christian leadership in Africa is clear. May God grant us grace to fulfill our high calling.

ENDNOTE

¹An address given as part of the ACTEA International Lectureships 1988-89, to gatherings of theological students and staff in eleven locations throughout Africa, under the title "Wanted: Servant-Leaders. The Challenge of Christian Leadership in Africa Today." The text of the entire lecture series is to be published shortly by Africa Christian Press.