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THE MODERN QUEST FOR AN AFRICAN THEOLOGY REVISED IN THE LIGHT OF ROMANS 1:18-25

Part II

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN THEOLOGY

Alfred Muli

Pastor Alfred Muli in Part I of this article, published in the last issue of AJET (16.1), examined the biblical text of Romans 1:18-25, touching on the moral defect of sinful human nature. In this article the author draws some pertinent conclusions which provide important theological presuppositions for the development of an African Christian Theology.

INTRODUCTION

A wrong analysis of sickness leads to defective prescription of therapy and may, all too often, lead to death. Similarly a wrong understanding of the moral condition of fallen mankind, results in faulty presuppositions, leading to a defective theology.

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African evangelicals should be deeply concerned that this appears to be the case with a vast majority of the non-evangelical theologians who are aggressively engaged in the modern quest for an African Theology. Their proposals reflect some striking theological pitfalls. They demonstrate a defective understanding of the moral condition of fallen mankind.

Kato has strong words in describing the quest for an African Theology which disregards the foundational doctrine of the moral condition of fallen mankind. Such an effort, he says:

Is a funeral march of Biblical Christianity and a heralding of syncretism and universalism. It has for its funeral directors the undiscerning theologians who fail to see the spiritual issues at stake because of their unguided enthusiasm for projecting African personality (Kato, *Pitfalls*, p.55).

The objective of this section is to develop a Christian theological reflection for the African situation. This will be accomplished by drawing theological conclusions from Paul's teaching about the moral condition of fallen mankind and evaluating the non-evangelical proposals for an African Theology in light of Romans 1:18-25. In both cases various authors will be examined in order to provide a cross-section view. At the end a proposal for methodology toward a Christian Theology for the African context is included.

THEOLOGICAL CONCLUSIONS AND EVALUATION

1. Fallen men and women are sinners (vs. 18). They are guilty before God. This is evident in their ungodly and unrighteous nature (v.18), a serious predicament which can only be canceled through the revealed righteousness received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (1:16-17 cf. Eph. 2:8-9).

In the modern quest for an African Theology it is important to embrace this teaching as a fundamental presupposition.

African evangelicals approach theology from this presupposition. The late Dr. Byang Kato viewed sin as the basic human predicament. He said, "All human tragedies, be they sickness, poverty or exploitation, are mere symptoms of the root cause, which the Bible calls sin (ie. original not individual sin).... Man's fundamental dilemma is alienation from God" (Kato, *Biblical*, p.16-17).

Adeyemo, the General Secretary of the Association of Evangelicals in Africa, AEA, has a radical view of man's sinful condition. Due to the nature of

sin (Jer. 17:9; Ps. 51:5) he asserts: "No one is qualified since all by birth inherit a sin nature... Scripture says all were dead in trespasses and sins. What can a dead man do to procure his salvation "(Adeyemo, "The Salvation Debate," *EAJET*, p.16).

Dr. Richard Gehman who has lived in Africa for long as an AIM missionary has written much about African Theology from an evangelical view point. He makes an interesting parallel between the effect of sin on man and on man's culture. He says, "The effects of sin on culture is analogous to the effects of sin on man" (Gehman, *Doing*, p.94). So if man's culture has not been transformed by the gospel, it remains corrupted by sin. This is not an absolute corruption though. But we need not exalt our culture at the expense of the gospel.

Professor J.N.K. Mugambi is a contemporary non-evangelical African Theologian. He is one of the leading philosophical exponents of Christian theology in African scholarship. He commands a growing influence among modern intellectuals of Africa and abroad. However, he has a defective view of the biblical teaching on the moral condition of man. This is implied in his understanding of the concept of salvation.

He says, "salvation may be defined as the ultimate hope of realization and self-fulfillment which transcends the finitude of natural and historical processes" (Mugambi, *African*, x). He then defines liberation as:

the penultimate process of eliminating dependence (which is dehumanizing) and enhancing integrity and independence (which are humanizing) in every aspect of socio-political life both for individuals and for society as a whole (Mugambi, *African*, x).

With those definitions in mind he then asserts:

"In the African context and in the Bible, salvation, as a theological concept, cannot be complete without liberation, as a socio-political concept... Liberation is the objective task of contemporary African Christian Theology" (Mugambi, p.12).

According to Mugambi man's basic problem is socio-political. It is oppression, exploitation, and poverty. Salvation is a removal of those factors, giving way to a realisation of personal integrity and political independence, a utopian state which can be achieved by man's own effort. This clearly goes

counter to the sound teaching of the Bible about the moral condition of fallen mankind. The only hope he has is in Jesus Christ.

2. Fallen men and women are under God's wrath, the righteous and selfless indignation of God, because of their rebellion against God (vs. 18).

Therefore, every non-Christian African, whether religious or irreligious, and in whatever socio-political and economic situation, is under the wrath of God.

O'Donovan, an evangelical western missionary in Africa, has written a popular book on African theology from an evangelical perspective. He firmly embraces this view. He points out that God is the Judge of what sin is, irrespective of the human situation. He asserts: "God is the Judge, and has decided what is right and what is wrong without reference to any culture or tradition." (O'Donovan. *Introduction to Biblical*, p.90).

In describing hope for the oppressed people in South Africa, Bishop Tutu says: "Oppressed peoples must hear that, according to the Bible, God is always on the side of the downtrodden" (Tutu, "The Theology of Liberation," *African Theology En Route*, p.166). This is a correct statement. But in view of the wrong emphasis of Liberation Theology on socio-political salvation as the essence of the gospel, caution must be taken. Whether oppressed or not, man without Christ is under the wrath of God.

3. Fallen mankind has access to experiential knowledge about God (vs. 19). This knowledge is limited in extent and depth to that which is knowable about God as revealed in the visible created order, namely General Revelation (vs. 19).

This goes counter to the contention of some African theologians that Africans have always truly known God. Idowu is one of these African theologian. He believes that Africans gained unlimited knowledge about God through General Revelation. In his words, he writes.

If revelation indeed means God's self disclosure, if he has left his mark upon the created order and his witness within every man, then it follows that revelation [general] cannot be limited in scope and that it is meant for all mankind, all rational beings irrespective of race or color (Idowu. *African Traditional Religion* . p.56).

For sure, it is rather naive and myopic to think that Africans, before the coming of Christianity, never had experiential knowledge about God at all (cf

For sure, it is rather naive and myopic to think that Africans, before the coming of Christianity, never had experiential knowledge about God at all (cf Acts. 14:17, 17:26-27). However, the extent of their knowledge is much limited. A lot of truth about God remained unknowable through nature.

A more comprehensive knowledge of God is only possible by means of Special Revelation. Furthermore, the knowledge gained through General Revelation is "completely distorted though not obliterated" (Kato, *Pitfalls*, p.11).

4. The knowledge about God is not a product of man's own initiative but God's self manifestation (vs. 19).

Therefore, the little spark of knowledge that the Africans have about God is not to be attributed to their religious piety. It is God's own initiative and grace.

5. The revealed truth about God manifests the totality of divine attributes to the extent that they are knowable through General Revelation (vs. 20). However, fallen mankind has limited ability to perceive this truth through the responses of his mind and conscience (vs. 20)

Some African theologians fail to recognize the limitations of fallen man's ability to perceive divine things through General Revelation. An example is Muzorewa. He stretches the African's knowledge and perception of God too far. He contends that Africans had a trinitarian concept of God even before the historic event of incarnation. With that presupposition in mind he asserts: "The significance of the African concept of a trinitarian God prior to Christianity is that it renders the Traditional African Religion Christian in a peculiar way" (Muzorewa, *The Origins*, p.84). Hence the logical conclusion is that the African who believes and worships God in the traditional religious way is saved and has no need of the gospel. But Adeyemo provides a clear distinction between the means of revelation and the means of salvation. He correctly says:

Beginning from the created order to man's unique nature and including all God's activities in history as well as man's religious activities, all that man perceives is that there is a God. But such knowledge does not automatically save him (Adeyemo, *The Salvation*, p.6).

It must be noted that General Revelation is limited and cannot give salvific truth.

6. Fallen men and women, notwithstanding, continue to suppress the revealed truth about God in their wickedness (vs. 18b).

Although the Africans had a spark of knowledge about God before the coming of Christianity, the tragedy of the matter is that they suppressed it. Dr. Tite Tienou, one of the leading contemporary evangelical theologians in Africa, observes the ambiguity of seeking God in non-Christian religions like ATR. He says such an act of seeking is "at the same time a deformation of the knowledge of God, for men like to domesticate God" (Tienou, *Theological Task*, p.25)

The late Professor Okot P'Bitek is an example of African scholars who have gone to the extreme position in the suppression of truth about God. He advises Africans to be proud of their god as unique from the Christian God. He believes in the death of the Christian God. In his words:

The first duty of an African scholar is to remove these rusty Greek metaphysical dressings as quickly as possible, before African deities suffocate and die inside them in the same manner as the Christian God had perished. Because, now, when Christian theologians try to break open the Hellenistic coffin in which the Christian God was imprisoned, he is no longer to be seen. Fritz Mautherner has proclaimed God is dead, the time has come to write his history (P'Bitek, *African Religions*, p.105).

We need to be aware of the author's theological presupposition when we read their works.

7. Fallen mankind has ignored the revealed truth about God and does not glorify him (vs. 21).

The non-Christian religious piety found in ATR is actually a turning away from the known truth about God to idolatry.

Schoffeleers rightly observes that some African theologians think ATR is "a valid preparation and pre-figuration of the biblical message which had been brought to Africa by the missionaries" (Schoffeleers, "Black and African Theology" *Journal*, p.100). Ntetem is a good case in point. He believes that conversion is a process of turning away from half light into the fullness of light.

"The mixture of truth and error is an indispensable presupposition of the acceptance of the gospel" (Ntetem, "Initiation," *A Reader*, p.104).

This is a misconception of the biblical teaching that fallen man, in his false religiosity, is turning away from the true God. The tragedy of the matter with these African theologians is that "only the facts which agree with socio-religious experiences are taken into consideration at the expense of God's revelatory pronouncements" (Adeyemo, p.5). In other words truth is drawn from experiential observations. It is wrong to ignore God's Word in favor of experiences.

8. All the faculties of fallen men and women are corrupted and devoid of any true knowledge of God, resulting in a spontaneous tendency towards idolatry (vs. 21).

Therefore the modern idea of dialogue between Christianity and ATR must be rejected. The kind of dialogue being proposed assumes no superiority of knowledge of the truth. It is a kind of a compromise. Such a dialogue undermines the distinctive foundations of orthodox Christian beliefs, robbing Christianity of its unique and exclusive claim of truth.

The Christian party will have to pretend that the ATR party is a brother and a spiritual equal. Such a dialogue clearly ignores the moral condition of fallen mankind.

ATR proponents advocate for such a dialogue between Christianity and ATR. Shorter believes that: "Syncretism is the absence of dialogue or perhaps the failure of dialogue" (Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, p.6). The overriding theme of the book is dialogue. In the same tone, Pobee asserts: "The days of militant propaganda in [Christian] theology should give way to dialogue and a recognition of the religious pluralism of the world" (Pobee, *Towards*, p.42). Finally Mpagi says, "Christianity must promote a living dialogue with the African cultural setting" (Mpagi, *Christian Worship*, ACS, p.1994).

But due to the nature of fallen man's knowledge of God there is honestly no room for such a religious dialogue. There can never possibly be a meaningful dialogue. We can only inform them about God and salvation.

9. Fallen mankind pretends to be wise. But, the fact of the matter is that he is foolish in regard to divine things, which is evident in his religious idolatry (vs. 22).

Despite the claim and appearance of wisdom in the religious piety of the African, he remains ignorant in the things of God.

10. In his false religiosity fallen mankind exchanges or substitutes the glory of God for images or idols and worships the creature rather than the Creator (vss. 23, 25a).

Therefore, all the worship of "God" in ATR amounts to nothing but idolatry. We don't mean that everything in ATR is idolatry, but the act of worship itself is idolatry.

This theological conclusion creates a great bone of contention among African theologians. Mbiti believes that Africans have truly worshipped God in ATR.

He defines worship as, "man's act or acts of turning to God" and says, "Sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African people" (Mbiti, *Concepts*, p.179). Idowu finds the view that ATR worship is idolatrous as unfair. He rationalizes that the images and symbols used in ATR were given spiritual quality and in themselves were meaningless. He says, "It is the divine entity, that is represented by the material object, to whom worship is rendered" (Idowu, p.125). But once again it is important to bring in here our definition of idolatry as represented by Hodge. "Idolatry is meant to include not merely the worship of false gods, but the worship of the true God by images" (Hodge, *A Commentary*, p.39). This view contrasts with Idowu's view.

Kato believes ATR worship was idolatrous. He correctly comments:

While it is recognized that adherents of ATR are not devoid entirely of the knowledge of God, it is evident that they have distorted that knowledge. They have turned that knowledge into idol or spirit worship (Kato, *Pitfalls*, p.113).

11. Despite the human neglect, God rightfully retains and deserves the sovereign blessedness forever as His divine prerogative.

Therefore, even though the African in ATR worship neglects the true God, the God of the Bible remains the only true object of worship as a divine prerogative.

12. The result of all this is that fallen mankind is without excuse for his ungodliness. Therefore, men and women are justly under the wrath and judgement of God.

Worship in ATR is idolatrous and a demonstration of ungodliness for which the participants are without excuse. They rightly deserve God's judgement.

CONCLUSION

In summary we have seen that the moral condition of fallen mankind is guilty of sin and that all his thoughts and conduct are corrupted by sin. This corruption is not in an absolute sense. Fallen mankind is not as evil as he could possibly be. The nature of the moral condition of fallen mankind is that he is in an urgent need of the saving grace of Jesus Christ.

We must note that the purpose of this article is by no means to undermine wholesale the non-evangelical effort toward an African Theology. The aim is to point out some serious theological defects arising from faulty biblical presuppositions, particularly of the effects of sin on man's heart.

As a matter of fact, the writings of these non-evangelicals voice out important issues that the evangelical church of Africa needs to address. We will point out these issues and also provide proposals for a methodology toward an African Theology.

Issues for Evangelicalism

The evangelical church must wrestle with the issue of communication. How can we communicate effectively the Christian faith in the African cultural milieu? The socio-political and economic situations in Africa must be thoroughly studied. The African cultural customs and values need to be investigated. The beliefs and practice of ATR must be learned. African languages must be studied. African thought patterns, idioms and categories should be utilized for the formulation of an African Christian Theology. The cultural and religious concepts should be used as eye openers, redemptive analogies or points of contact.

Once this has been done, the socio-political and economic concerns of our people will be addressed in a more meaningful and persuasive way.

The evangelical church must also deal more exhaustively with the issue of the reality of General Revelation than has been done before. What is the extent of it? Is it salvific? These questions have been considered in this paper but not exhaustively.

Once all these issues have been dealt with the end result will be an effective communication of biblical Christianity in the African situation.

Concluding Proposal for Methodology

We will propose a theological methodology for a Christian Theology in the African context. This is a situational approach where the issue arises from the situation and then it is addressed from the word of God.

1. Critically analyze the situation.
2. Carefully determine the root issue.
3. Examine biblical teaching on the root issue from a proper hermeneutical procedure, that is, Grammatico - Historical method of exegesis.
4. Draw theological conclusions.
5. Apply those conclusions to the African issue in question.
6. Make use of the principles of effective communication as stated above.

This way we can develop a Christian theology which is relevant for the African situation, without undermining the sound teaching of the Bible. The result of our quest is then a Christian theology which is both authentically biblical and authentically African.

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