

THE AFRICAN DIMENSION OF CHRISTIANITY

An Editorial

"Christianity is a European religion," some would say, either in ignorance or with malice. The truth is otherwise. While it is true that missionaries in the last few centuries brought the gospel of Jesus Christ to Africa from Europe, the fact is that Christianity has deep roots in Africa and, in fact, is older than Islam.

The heart of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ, God incarnate in human flesh. If God's Son were to become man, he had to become a particular man in a particular place. He could not be everywhere, speaking every language as his own mother tongue.

What continent is identified with Jesus' earthly life? The land where Jesus was born, ministered and died is on a land bridge connecting three great continents: Europe, Asia and Africa. Jesus was born neither in Africa, Europe, Asia nor in the America's. He was born at a point that most nearly connects the three great continents and the three races. Geographically, the Holy Land and Africa are connected, only separated superficially by the Suez Canal in 1869.

Europeans have pictured Jesus as a pale man with Anglo Saxon features. Africans have portrayed Jesus as a black African. The truth is that he was neither. He was an olive skinned Mediterranean Jew, neither white nor black. Jesus was the Man for all mankind. He identified with every human being. His land and colour help us to understand that God "so loved the world," not just one land or race.

It is also important to understand the African connection with the Bible. No European wrote any book in the Bible. Jesus Christ never walked in Europe. Not until twenty years after the death of Christ was the Christian faith taken to Europe. Lydia was the first European convert (Acts 16:15).

Instead, Africa is prominent in the Bible. Israel was redeemed from bondage in Egypt. The Queen of Sheba who visited king Solomon was probably from Ethiopia in Africa. Moses, the great law giver, was married to one who was possibly an African (Numb. 12:1). It was an African who rescued Jeremiah from a pit when no one else would do it (Jer. 38:7). Israeli prophets foretold of the impact of the gospel on Africa (Ps. 68:31). Jesus was taken as a baby to Egypt

to escape the wrath of King Herod (Matt. 2:15). So Jesus never lived in Europe but he lived in Africa briefly. An African helped Jesus carry his cross when Jesus broke down under its weight (Matt. 2:15). Simon came from Cyrene in North Africa.

On the day of Pentecost Africa was represented. Settlers of Cyrene were there (Acts 2:10). An African from Ethiopia was one of the first converts outside the Jewish circle (Acts 8). An African is mentioned during the first missionary conference (Acts 13:1). Simeon, nicknamed the Niger, was a faithful disciple. Niger, from which the river Niger and the countries of Niger and Nigeria are named, means "black." Simeon was obviously a black man (see Living Bible). Either he was a black man from Africa who had assumed a Jewish name, or he was a Jew in origin but had lived in Africa.

It should be remembered that the gospel was not first taken to Europe but to Africa. The Ethiopian eunuch was converted to Christ and took the gospel back to his home country up the Nile river in Nubia where he was an important official (Acts 8:26-38). People from Cyrene in north Africa were leaders in the church in Antioch (Acts 11:20). Apollos was a powerful preacher of the Word of God. He came from Alexandria in north Africa (Acts 18:24-28).

We know little of the church in Africa from AD 30-180. But by AD 180 there was a large church in Egypt. There is a tradition that John Mark, the evangelist, was a missionary to Egypt and that the churches which grew up in Alexandria were the result of his ministry. The first converts in Egypt were of Greek origin living in the city of Alexandria. But later the gospel spread to the "Copts" or Egyptians of Hamitic origin. In AD 180 twelve Christians were martyred for Christ in the city of Carthage in North Africa.

Not only did the church in Africa grow rapidly but it produced some outstanding leaders. The Catechetical School of Alexandria was a very important school in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. From our limited knowledge we have of church history we can say that this was the first theological college in the Christian church. Clement of Alexandria and Origen were famous teachers. Tertullian from Carthage was a brilliant lawyer and converted to Christ in AD 192. Tertullian was the first Christian theologian to use the word, "Trinity." St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, was a great preacher and theologian. No other Christian after Paul had such a profound and prolonged influence upon Christianity as Augustine.

Therefore, we can affirm with confidence that there is a vital African dimension to Christianity. Though the Judeo-Christian revelation was granted to the Hebrews, the Africans were among the first to know and love the Lord Jesus.