



The Good News of the Kingdom

Mission Theology for the Third Millennium

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Themes in African Theology of Mission

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Introduction

The world of the last decade of the twentieth century differs from that of the end of the nineteenth century in many respects. In Africa, a significant aspect of this difference lies in the religious landscape of the continent. Christianity was unknown to most Africans at the end of the nineteenth century. Today, except for the northern regions of the continent, Christianity claims multitudes of adherents in Africa. In that sense, the churches of Africa are no longer outposts of foreign mission agencies. They have themselves become missionary churches (Karamaga 1990, 95). The growth and vitality of Christianity in Africa establish the immediate and general context for the development of themes in theology of mission from African perspectives.

The theology of Christian mission in Africa is also shaped by the history of Christian presence and ministry in the continent and current economic, political, social and religious realities. Consequently, in Africa, the themes of mission theology will rise out of the following four movements. First, African Christians must craft a theology that deals adequately with the need to consolidate and secure the gains of Christian mission. Second, African Christians must be liberated from the complexes associated with African identity so that they can participate fully in the mission of the crucified and risen Lord. Third, in an age of religious crisis and confusion in the continent, African mission theologians must articulate reasons for continued focus on expanding the Christian faith. Fourth, African Christians will need to establish solid theological bases for dealing with the

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staggering socio-economic and political crises of the continent.

The foregoing four movements provide the basis and context of the present reflections on African theology of mission. The themes sketched here are only illustrative of the kind of missiological reflection needed in Africa as we move into the third millennium. It should also be noted that they are not intended to present a coherent African theology of mission. Rather they offer one person's viewpoint on reflection on the good news of the Kingdom in an African setting.

From Spreading the Seed to Securing the Foundations

Arthur Glasser expressed a fundamental fact of mission theory and practice when he wrote: "The Christian movement must focus on consolidation while reaching out in expansion" (1984, 726). In this double focus the first one, namely consolidation, is particularly needed in Africa as we enter the twenty-first century.

Ikenga-Metuh contends that in the third millennium, the emphasis of mission in Africa will need to "shift from 'primary evangelization' or 'extensive evangelization' to 'pastoral evangelization' or 'intensive evangelization'" (1989, 12). In Glasser's terminology, the focus will have to be on consolidation rather than expansion in Africa. This is not to suggest that expansion or the spreading of the seed of the gospel is no longer necessary in Africa. After all, the optimistic vision of Roland Oliver has not become reality. Oliver, noting the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa south of the Sahara desert since 1912, conjectured that "if things were to go at the same rate, there would be no pagans left in Africa after the year 1992" (1956, 8). Not only are there "pagans" left in Africa south of the Sahara, African Traditional Religions are currently showing signs of renewed vitality (Mbembe 1988). This fact and the missionizing zeal of other religions in the continent require that African Christians maintain "primary evangelization" as part of their mission involvement.

Yet the theological arguments for the priority of expansion are seldom more than statements of pragmatic strategies of Christian activism. For evangelicals especially, this kind of mission theology succeeds in introducing people to the gospel; but it neither nourishes them nor deepens their faith so that they can resist competing religions and ideologies and thus become themselves agents of propagation of the good news.

In Africa, expansion without consolidation has had disastrous consequences. Nominality has become a way of life for many, while thousands of more-or-less Christian religious movements have established themselves in the continent. African mission theologians therefore need to reverse these trends by developing a theology that seeks to permanently plant the Church of Christ in Africa and anchor the gospel deeply into current African cultures (Mushete 1989, 107). This kind of theology will help reduce

the perception that the Christian gospel is foreign to Africa and Africans. It will also secure a basis for Africans to become joyfully and unashamedly active in mission. African ownership of the gospel is critical for African participation in mission.

From Identity Crisis to Liberated Participation in Mission

Contemporary analysts commonly describe Africa as a continent in crisis. Of all the crises Africans face today, perhaps none is as devastating as the crisis of identity. Culturally, many Africans are alienated from themselves and have become foreigners in their own countries. This reality which Mushete calls "anthropological poverty" (1989, 103), robs Africans of their selfhood. It causes them to define their identity in relationship to foreigners, particularly Europeans. Africans perceive themselves and are often perceived as either assimilated Europeans or as the exact opposite of Europeans.

This is not the place to examine the causes of the Africans' identity crisis. Whether "the missionary enterprise produced what can be called an African Christian identity problem" (Bediako 1983, 88) or not, the fact is that the question of African identity relates directly to issues of mission theology in the continent. For instance, does adherence to the gospel imply mindless westernization? Do all calls for specific African appropriations of the gospel necessarily mean rejection of the truth once and for all delivered? If the answer to either question is affirmative, then why should thinking Africans embrace such an alienating gospel or become agents of its propagation?

An alien Christianity produces, at best, numerical adherence and superficial vitality. Such a Christianity derives its real strength from outside Africa and is unable to deal with problems that are genuinely African. African adherents to this kind of Christianity tend to be preoccupied more with what happens abroad than with crucial issues of their context. They are sometimes more focused on fighting alien theological battles than on boldly nourishing the faithful and proclaiming the good news.

If the African identity crisis is as important and serious as outlined above, then African mission theologians must show how, biblically and theologically, being African is neither a curse nor a shame. This is a necessary step because, more than any other race on earth, a theology of curse has been used as a basis for evangelizing the black race (Mbembe 1988, 40-42). African Christians therefore need to be restored in full humanity by the Lord, Creator and Redeemer. Thus liberated by the good news of the Kingdom, African Christians will be able to participate fully in the mission of the crucified and risen Lord.

Boldness in the Face of Religious Confusion and Crisis

Religious pluralism is alive and well in contemporary Africa. Countless religions compete vigorously for the hearts, minds and souls of Africans. This religious competition creates confusion and provides the breeding ground for opportunists of all kinds. This has prompted analysts such as Achille Mbembe to claim that religious identity no longer exists in Africa. Rather, he observes, Africans tend to weigh the offers made by the religious merchants and decide in favor of the ones which bring the best immediate practical benefits (1988, 69).

Competition for Africa is particularly fierce between Christianity and Islam. It is clear that "the two religions continue to compete for the soul of Africa" (Mazrui 1990, 257). Yet African Christian mission theologians should not pessimistically resign themselves to the prospect of Islam once again uprooting Christianity in Africa. They should not let themselves be carried by the optimism of people like Mazrui, who thinks that Africa will become a laboratory for religious and ideological cooperation. In other words, they should not allow the possibility of conflict with Islam or other religions to determine their agenda for mission theology and practice. Rather they must seize the reality of religious competition as a challenge for them to articulate ways of bold and humble proclamation of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

Denigration, conquest and triumphalism have too frequently been ingredients of Christian missionizing in Africa. They must be discarded in the present climate of religious competition and crisis affecting the continent. One need not denigrate the followers of other religions in order to magnify Christ and his gospel. Likewise, conquest and triumphalism may produce short-term gains, but they are destructive in the long term. Consequently, the way forward is to produce a theology of Christian mission which convincingly demonstrates that the gospel can be proclaimed boldly and without compromise, denigration or conquest. This is one of the most urgent themes for reflection by African mission theologians in the years to come.

Good News in the Face of Socio-Economic and Political Crisis

In articulating a theology of mission, African theologians will have to deal with issues related to the goal of mission. In what sense is the gospel good news, given the general social, economic and political crises affecting Africa? For what purpose should a person choose to become a participant in the gospel? Are the promises of the gospel purely otherworldly, or should the gospel be used exclusively as a manual for curing present ills?

Given the fact that "reconstruction is the new priority for African nations in the 1990s," "the churches and their theologians will need to respond to

this new priority in relevant fashion, to facilitate this process of reconstruction" (Mugambi 1991, 36). Many African Christians who are fully committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ agree with the idea that "preaching Jesus Christ in Africa cannot be reduced to a simple appointment for the hereafter. [Preaching] is a formal invitation to total salvation in respect of all domains of African life" (Chipenda and Karamaga 1991, 26). They realize, however, that such ideas can easily be misinterpreted to mean that the gospel is more about material well-being than spiritual restoration. That is why they insist, with Pénoukou, that the quality of an individual's life is evaluated more in terms of his or her being than in relationship to possessions (1984, 91). Consequently, the gospel is about transforming the very nature of human beings so that they can live and practice compassionate service and justice in their societies.

Mission theologians in Africa must wrestle seriously with the human situation of mission in the continent. To do so they need to begin with the recognition that "mission . . . [is] to be contextual, holistic and liberating" (Arias 1992, 30). They cannot afford to let themselves be trapped in the sterile debate on the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility. Rather they will derive guidance from the conviction that "religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world" (James 1:27). They will neither forsake the importance of calling people to conversion to Christ and personal piety nor abandon the focus on urging Christ's disciples to engage in costly service.

Conclusion

During the 1990s and into the next millennium, the African continent will present a laboratory for testing Glasser's agenda for mission theology in the nineties. The foregoing reflections, cast in four categories, have indicated major themes for African mission theology as we enter the twenty-first century. There are encouraging signs that many people have begun reflecting on the issues outlined here. My personal hope is that in the near future Africans will cease being only consumers of mission theologies produced elsewhere. May God grant that African Christians become contributors to global mission theology.