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Why Africa needs Augustine

An Ajet Editorial

African Christianity is still on a restless search. For the last thirty years, since the wave of independence in the early sixties swept over the continent, the African church has been looking for greatness--a spiritual greatness that would be the envy of the watching world.

It is not as though the church has not tried hard to find the secret of greatness. The church has traveled far down the path of cultural authenticity. African theologians dug deep into the African traditional past to find the good in ATR upon which to build a contextualized Christian theology. African versions of liberation theology, ecumenical theology, charismatic theology, feminist theology, and fundamentalist theology joined in the race to become an "authentic" theology for Africa. Today the marathon for authentic theology has become a maze of theological confusion across the continent.

The African church has sought greatness through nationalization. African Church leaders took charge of their denominations and educational institutions. This was a good and necessary step. Yet some of the very problems that plagued missionary leadership a generation ago--the abuse of power, the squandering of resources, the unhealthy dependence on foreign money--reappeared in our nationalized institutions.

The church has sought greatness as the conscience of the nation and the defender of human rights. But all too often our prophets of social justice who decried corruption in the state found it within themselves and within their organizations and their witness was compromised.

The church has sought greatness along the path of church growth. Though the church has grown large, the masses within the church remain, for the most part, undisciplined. The promise of church growth as the way to greatness remains unfulfilled.

But there is another path of greatness that the modern African church has not explored with enough seriousness. I speak of the theological path blazed by Augustine, the Tunisian theologian of the 4th century. For a great theology produces a great church as surely as mediocre theology produces a mediocre church. Among the treasures of Augustine's theology that could put the African church along the path of true greatness are two gems that seem especially relevant.

The first gem found in the teaching of Augustine and needed by the contemporary African church, is the greatness of the gospel. In his day Augustine was forced to defend African Christian theology against a foreign import called Pelagianism. Pelagianism taught that the gospel is really about man taking responsibility to do his best and help his fellow man and thereby earn God's favor. Pelagianism turned the gospel into a vague religious humanism in which man was the central actor and God the quiet and passive bystander. The cross was reduced from being a powerful place of salvation to becoming a pale example of human sacrifice that should prod us on to wonderful deeds. Such theology emptied the cross of its power.

Augustine took one look at this flattering theology of human ability and saw it for what it was—the spiritual pride of man seeking to obscure the truth that he was a sinner who could not save himself. Augustine understood the Apostolic gospel to teach that man's sin had so eaten away his heart that he was in bondage to godlessness. Only the irresistible grace of God unleashed by the power of Christ's cross could save fallen mankind. The power of the cross was not just a pitiful plea for sinners to allow a pathetic Jesus standing helplessly at the door of the rebel heart to "enter in." Augustine taught that a conquering Christ demanded all men everywhere to repent, stormed the ramparts of our rebel fortresses, and brought the stubborn will into glad submission to his redemptive rule and reign.

Pelagianism is all around us today in Africa. Liberal Christianity in all its forms and evangelical Christianity in some of its forms are riddled with this human-centered theology that blunts the power of the cross. If the African church would find the path of greatness it must recover this God-centered

gospel that shows man for what he is—helpless in his sin—and God for who he is—the conquering Christ who purchased salvation on the cross for his church and unfailingly applies it to all for whom he died.

A second gemlike treasure of Augustine's theology is also needed by the church of Africa in its quest for maturity and greatness. I refer to his view of God. Augustine worshipped a great God who was the lord of history. Augustine's God was not shaken when the city of Rome fell in 410 AD. Augustine's God was not caught by surprise when the barbarians swept over Africa. Augustine worshipped a God whose purposes in history were bigger than nation-building, bigger than the goal of liberation or humanisation. Augustine believed in a God who was moving Africa and the world towards the true goal of all history—the coming of the City of God—the eternal kingdom of justice and peace to be established by God alone at the end of history.

Augustine resisted the temptation to reduce God's program of the kingdom to current political theories or economic ideologies. The church existed in Africa and the world as a witness that all things human (whether nations or ideologies or political agendas) are temporary and passing away. The only enduring future, the only future at all, is that future victory of Christ over all his enemies. This is the certain future that Augustine called "the City of God." No force could thwart such a God of history. No event or individual could escape the powerful gravity of God's providence which directed all earthly things towards the realization of the Kingdom in Christ.

African Christianity needs to hear Augustine on this point. Human and temporal goals consume the time and energy of the modern church. Martin Luther King struck this Augustinian note when he warned the churches to stay God-centered and kingdom-centered even while they work in the world:

Living in the colony of time, we are ultimately responsible to the empire of eternity. As Christians we must never surrender our supreme loyalty to any time-bound custom or earth bound idea, for at the heart of the universe is a higher reality—God and his kingdom of love—to which we must be conformed." (*Strength to Love*, NY:Harper and Row, 1959, page 1)

Living responsibly for the empire of eternity means turning our back on greed, lust for power and position. Living for eternity means enduring suffering patiently and surviving gladly in times of want knowing that eternal rewards await us from a great God who does all things well. Marxism has always sneered at this "pie- in- the- sky theology." Ironically, Marxism has all but disappeared as a serious option for the future while the vision of the Kingdom--thousands of years old--continues to burn bright. An exalted view of God and his sovereign purposes, and a more realistic view of man and his passing agendas is a critical need for the African church that would travel the path of greatness.

I am tempted to talk about Augustine's confidence in that greatest of all books, the Bible, or of his love for Christian unity but these are subjects for another time. The message for today must not be obscured: Africa needs Augustine because his vision of the greatness of the Gospel and the greatness of the Almighty God behind the Gospel can lift us from our restless wanderings and set us down on the true path of greatness.

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African Christianity's need to rediscover Augustine is another way of describing its need for theological renewal. The articles in this issue all address that need in a variety of ways. Gordon Molyneux explores one of the earliest chapters in the quest for a truly African and Christian theology as he examines "The Contribution to African Theology of the Faculté de Théologie Catholique in Kinshasa, Zaire." Julius Muthengi looks at the issue of poverty and seeks to offer a theological understanding of that perennial African dilemma. Ross Gaskin brings the eye of both a theologian as well as an anthropologist to his comparative study of the beliefs and customs of two tribes--one African and the other Australian. A number of book reviews also promise to sharpen our theological saws. May God help you to enjoy and profit from this issue of the *African Journal of Evangelical Theology*.

Notices and Contributors

Some special notices have arrived at the AJET editorial desk which we wish to pass along to our readers.

- The Faculty of the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology has recently published a book entitled *Perspectives on Leadership Training*. This collection of faculty essays explores the vital issue of training African men and women for effective leadership in today's changing world. Within Kenya the cost of the book is Ksh 200/=. The cost of the book surface mail anywhere in the world (including Africa) is \$5.00. The cost of the book sent Airmail is \$8.50 within Africa or \$10.00 elsewhere in the world. Please enclose a check payable to N.E.G.S.T.(Perspectives Account). Include a letter with your name and address and instructions for shipping and quantities desired. Send your order to: Perspectives Editorial Committee, NEGST, P.O. Box 24686, Nairobi, Kenya.
- Gordon Molyneux's *African Christian Theology* (San Francisco: Mellen, 1993), has just been published. The material presented here in AJET is drawn from that monograph with a fuller set of references and documentation. The monograph is based on doctoral research done at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, under the supervision of Professor Richard Gray. Another chapter from the dissertation, on Kimbanguist hymns, has already appeared in the *Journal of Religion in Africa*. Regarding this book, Adrian Hastings has stated: "The contribution which Dr Molyneux has made to an understanding of African theology in this book seems to me to be a very considerable one. It is remarkably comprehensive and ecumenical. No other work I know of has attempted to understand African theology in this way as a living whole." The hardback edition of the book will retail at \$69.95. Inquiries and orders may be addressed to: Mellen Research University Press, attention Dr Robert West, 534 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco CA 94133, USA.

- The Overseas Ministries Study Center, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, is pleased to announce the Research Enablement Program for the advancement of scholarship in studies of Christian Mission and Christianity in the non-Western World. For more information about application and qualifications please write to Mr. G.A. Little, REP Coordinator, OMSC, 490 Prospect Street, New Haven, CT, 06511-2196, USA.

About our contributors to this issue:

- Dr Gordon Molyneux is director of the *Institut Supérieur Théologique de Bunia* in Zaire, and a member of the governing body of the Accrediting Council for Theological Education in Africa (ACTEA). Dr Molyneux holds an MA from the University of Oxford in England, and his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. The article appearing in AJET is adapted from Dr Molyneux's new book, *African Christian Theology*.
- Dr Julius Muthengi is the Deputy principal for Academic Affairs at Scott Theological College in Kenya. He holds his doctorate from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the United States. He has contributed previously to the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*.
- Dr Ross Gaskin is a member of WEC International serving with that agency from 1960 both in Ghana and as Regional Director in Australia. He is currently a professor of Missiology at Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology. The article published in AJET first appeared in the newly released *Perspectives on Leadership Training*.