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Keeping Both Eyes: The Value of Church History

An AJET Editorial

A popular Russian proverb warns that “He who dwells on the past loses an eye; But he who forgets the past loses both eyes”.

Most of us can readily agree with the point made by the first half of this old proverb. Perhaps we have known leaders or teachers who never had a new idea or seemed to replay the past over and over again at the expense of a meaningful engagement with the present. No thinking African Christian wants to be irrelevant by becoming obsessed with the past.

But be careful to read the last half of the proverb. Those who neglect the past in an attempt to stay “current” suffer a worse fate than those who dwell on the past. To forget the past is to lose both eyes. Rather a severe price to pay for indifference to history but the old adage should be a wake up call to the church in Africa. The lack of interest in African church history in many of our churches and schools is cause for alarm. We are losing our eyesight as we lose our hindsight.

But is the adage to be trusted when it warns us that neglect of the study of history is to run the risk of losing our theological and Biblical vision? What does the adage mean when it says that those who forget the past lose both eyes? Very simply the proverb is reminding us that we can lose our ability to see with understanding. Like an uninformed tourist cruising through a game park with no background in African mammals, the African Christian without an historical consciousness may look at a lot of things in the present but see and understand little. A lack of historical sense in the church can produce a shallowness in our understanding of the Bible, our culture and our own identity as a church today. The Bible has good reasons in mind when it commands us to “be careful not to forget the Lord, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Deut. 6:12). The healthy church joins in the pledge of the psalmist: “ I will

remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago" (Psalms 77:11).

What is needed is a generation of leaders in Africa who can use the past creatively without dwelling on the past obsessively. The pastor who hears about the latest cult and links it with the false teachers of previous centuries; the biblical exegete who has combed through the commentators of the past; the apologist who strings his bow with the arrows of historical awareness as part of the defense of the faith—these are the ones who add richness to the church because of their wise use of Church history. Such pastors, apologists and exegetes are needed by the Church in Africa today.

The articles in this issue are aimed at helping African Christians to grow in their awareness of African Church History. Richard Pierard presents us with the story of German missions in East Africa in World War I. James Ndyabahika looks at the East African Revival and offers a positive evaluation of its impact. J.W. Hofmeyer examines the maturing of the Church History Society of Southern Africa—a useful vehicle for increasing the historical awareness of our leaders and churches. Finally, Musa Gaiya shows how useful Church history can be for the African Church by looking at the history of a Bible translation—the Hausa Bible of 1980. Every denomination and language group in Africa would benefit from a better understanding of the history of the translation of the Bible into their vernacular. Such translations may well be the most important factor in the rise of Christianity on this continent in the last two centuries. A number of useful reviews rounds out this particular issue of AJET.

We hope you enjoy this issue. We also hope that while you read these articles you will deepen, if just a little, your awareness of and appreciation for Church history. In so doing you will take one step closer to a two-eyed faith that is relevant without being superficial.

Contributors to this Issue

- Dr Richard Pierard is a Professor of History at Indiana State University in the United States. He is also the Secretary-Treasurer of the Conference on Faith and History, a North American society for Christian historians. He is the author of many books including a recently published survey of Church History from Moody Press.
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- Mr. Musa Gaiya is a lecturer of the Department of Religious Studies, University of Jos, Nigeria. He is currently completing his PhD in African Church History. The author of many articles, Mr. Gaiya is also an assistant pastor of an ECWA Church in Jos.