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THE KEY TO THE AFRICAN HEART: RETHINKING MISSIONARY STRATEGY IN AFRICA

Paul Kisau

*The heart is the deepest and most illusive part of mankind. Unless we understand the heart we cannot understand the "real you." Yet how difficult it can be to search the depths of the human heart. Back in 1928 Willoughby explored this question in his book, **The Soul of the Bantu**. How much better for an African himself to explore and understand the heart of the African.*

In this article Pastor Paul Kisau reflects on the African heart as he wrestles with an old question, "How deep has the gospel been planted in the heart of the African?" This article reflects on the successes and failures of missionary evangelisation in Africa. More than that, he poses a question, "What is the key to planting the gospel deeply within the heart of Africa?" He concludes by recommending ways in which partnership can be established for missionary strategy.

INTRODUCTION

There has been in the recent months and years a quest to re-evaluate theology in Africa. This quest, however, is not limited to Africa. The emergence of a post-modern worldview has given birth to post-modern theologians, who claim to be different from those of yesterday. There is therefore a search for

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authentic theology, one that shuns both extremes, that is not being fundamentalist neither liberal. In Africa, this has come out in the form of a search for right theological education. Articles featuring in the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, volumes 16.1 and 16.2 clearly show this kind of quest.¹

This paper seeks to provide a voice in the midst of many other voices, a voice that is borne out of the missionary encounter of the author. This voice is an attempt to interpret and apply Romans 10:9² to the African situation. The passage provides the essential element of the intended subject: the heart.

The heart is the most significant element in Christian theology, whether this theology is evangelical or otherwise. The Bible speaks of the heart as being the source of life and the place where the Lord dwells. The basic question before us is, has the gospel reached the African heart? The gospel here requires two steps. The first step is that of confessing Jesus as the Lord. This is coupled by the second step of believing in the heart that God raised Him from the dead. In other words, the mouth confirms what the heart has believed or is in the process of believing. The question we are addressing in this paper is, has the African believed by the heart what has been confessed by the mouth? What kind of evidence is there to point either way?

In order to answer the questions raised above, the following points will be investigated in some detail. That is, the African heart and Christianity, and the missionary activity in Africa. After this preliminary investigation, we shall give some recommendations as to what could be the key to the heart. The suggestions offered here do not by any means pretend to provide all the answers to this most difficult topic, but are an attempt to stimulate a discussion. Therefore, they may prove to be helpful to those who are willing to listen to an African voice in these matters, since there have been many voices from elsewhere.

THE AFRICAN HEART: A WORKING DEFINITION

The working definition that is going to be provided here is solely based on the author's understanding and experience, and may not be something that has been proven academically. However, this paper proposes that a simple understanding of a human heart does not require academic ratification.

¹ *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 16.1 & 16.2 (1997)

² KJV Romans 10:9 "That if you shall confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and shall believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you shall be saved."

Nevertheless, a biblical definition of the human heart will be given later in the section dealing with the interpretation of our primary text.

In order to draw up a working definition of the African heart, the heart has been divided into four layers. These layers will form the basis of discussion here as a way of defining the African heart. That is, *the conditioned layer, the religious layer, the accommodating layer and the decision making layer*. Our proposal is that these four layers make up the real heart of every person, and unless we have a working understanding of each layer, it would be extremely difficult to communicate the gospel to the real person.

The Conditioned Layer: African Cultural Values

The Rev. Dr. Richard Gehman in his book *Doing African Christian Theology* rightly says "in the communication of the gospel we need to be oriented to the cultural heritage of the receivers if we are to communicate most effectively".³ Every heart has a culturally conditioned layer and this is the first layer that comes out in all peoples. This layer determines what one wears and eats; where one goes, and how one responds in a relationship; how one talks and how one perceives things. That is, those things which are normality and abnormality to an individual. The African too has this layer which has been conditioned over the years by the culture around him. If this layer should come through after one has become a Christian, it is only because the layer is there and one cannot get rid of it. The cultural values that one learns after birth become a part of life and to do away with them is to do away with the person. This layer defines the person among other persons and therefore is an important component of person-hood. Through this layer, we can speak of an African and a European, a Mkamba and a Masai. This layer has been deeply affected by various things since the advent of western culture in Africa.⁴ The conditioned layer works as an expression of our next layer, that of African spirituality, so much that every action is coloured with spiritual input.

The Religious Layer: African Spirituality

Closely related to the conditioned layer is the religious layer. This layer defines the spirituality of the person. Nearly everything is done in a religious

³ Richard Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology: An Evangelical Perspective*, (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), 1.

⁴ E.G. Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion*, (London: Sheldon Press, 1962, Revd. edition, 1974), vii. Parrinder notes rightly here that, "far deeper changes affect African life at every level. Commercial, industrial, technical, educational and urban influences have demanded great and rapid adjustments."

way, so that many people who are not Africans may not understand the place of spirituality to an African. From birth to death, an African life is celebrated in a religious way. Religion is part of African life. That is, it is almost impossible to separate one from the other.⁵

Africans are aware of the divine presence in such a vivid way that often times the fear of the spirit world can be very overwhelming. The concept of the Supreme Being has been proved a dominant factor in the shaping of African life.⁶ Mystical powers, magic, witchcraft and sorcery are some of the elements that add to the fear of the spirit world.⁷

The spirituality layer forms an important part of the African heart and any attempt to convert an African without addressing it may not produce the best results. There is need to understand this layer and consider it, otherwise there could be a danger of unhealthy accommodation, where the gospel is accepted alongside African traditional beliefs. This leads us to the discussion of the third proposed layer, that is, the accommodating layer.

The Accommodating Layer: African Adaptability

The advent of other cultures in Africa and the enslavement of African people did allow the expression of another layer in their hearts, the accommodating layer. This layer accommodates those things that in a sense are foreign to the two layers described above, yet the African person has very little power over them. A Swahili proverb may shed some light on this layer, *mkono usiwesa kuukata, ubusu* ("a hand that you cannot cut, kiss"). That is, if you cannot change the situation nor do anything about it, accept it. However, this acceptance does not mean that the already existing value system is replaced. On the contrary, room is created for the new concept so that accommodation occurs.

⁵ Read any book in African life, and there, find religion intermingled with every day life. See any books by John Mbiti and any other writer on African Christianity and theology.

⁶ See the discussion by John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* and Richard Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*.

⁷ Some post-modern Africans may not accept the fear of the spirit world, yet a careful look at their life style may reveal a deep seated aspect of this kind of spirituality. This statement may be validated by the number of cases that are reported in most churches of people visiting the witch doctors in secret.

The harsh climate and many other factors may be to blame for this layer, since there are many natural calamities in African life. Sarafina, the star actor in the musical film, *Sarafina*,⁸ says that, "we do not need to seek for trouble because our life is trouble." This layer has played an important role in giving African people a sense of inferiority, since the outside cultures have been very overwhelming. However, there is no need to blame the layer, since what is wrong is the exploitation of it by foreign ideologies.

Western writers have contributed a great deal to the state of despair in African life. One example will suffice here. Parrinder set out to write about African Traditional Religion in order to expose the African. He calls these Africans a 'surging people.' The purpose of this exposure is to give the western world the idea of how to predict or even control the African's future. Parrinder sees religion as the tool of power and as such must be understood and cut down.⁹ The African has been used and is still being used. The hurtful thing is that, they are used as disposable items, so that after use, they are disposed of. A close look at African leadership in the colonial and independent Africa will show glaring evidence of this usage.

The western church, too, is not innocent of this kind of corruption. The pictures that are presented in fund-raising events testify to this misuse of African hospitality. Consequently, the west only knows Africa as a continent plagued with famine and death. There is famine and death, but there are good points too. Like any other place, the African continent is not spared the adverse outcome of human sin.

This kind of approach should stop and an alternative method devised. This of course is the main point of this paper and some suggested methods will be provided shortly. This then leads us to the fourth suggested layer, the decision making layer.

The Decision Making Layer: African Touch

This layer makes the decisions on the course of action that the person is to undertake. The rest of the layers play a large role here, since they filter the information received before this layer makes the final decision. The decision made by this layer sometimes is confused because while not wanting to offend any of the three layers, a decision has to be made. This decision in effect may try to accommodate all the layers although the course of action may be in favour

⁸ A South African musical film which was a hit in Nairobi and around the world a couple of years ago.

⁹ Parrinder, 9.

of one layer. This is when the hide and seek game begins. What is said may not be what is done, reflecting the life of the two boys in Jesus' parable (Mat. 21:28-31). In this parable, the first son promises not to do what the father sent him to do, but eventually does the job. The second son on the contrary sets out to do it, but eventually does not do the job. The African person may promise to do something, only to realise that it is against another layer, and hence only obey the higher layer at that point. The decision layer is therefore in conflict with the three layers mentioned above. However, the cultural layer has a great deal to contribute when it comes to decision making. The community is a most important aspect for the African person, hence what others in the community think contributes immensely to the decision making layer.¹⁰

The decision making layer is the African touch, that which determines the actions taken. Yet, this layer does not exist in isolation as we have endeavoured to show above.

In short, these four layers make up the African heart and determine what course of action is taken and when it is taken. These layers have been drawn from experience of one who is an African, and one who has been struggling with life in Christ, since the Christian life brings with it new demands for the already burdened heart. This then leads us to the discussion of African Christianity in light of western evaluation. That is, the notion that African Christianity is a "mile long and an inch deep" will form the single motif for the discussion of this section.

AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY: A MILE LONG AND AN INCH DEEP?

There has been plenty of material attempting to give a history of Christianity in Africa. Dr. Mark Shaw's book¹¹, which gives a short history of African Christianity, comes at a time when a real history of the Christian faith in Africa is most needed. Shaw is justified to note that the previous works have

¹⁰ The book by Erasto Muga has highlighted the result of some African decisions under the pressure of western Christianity. These Africans could no longer bear the yoke of the missionaries and therefore broke loose to form African Independent Churches. This situation could have (may be) been avoided if the missionaries were willing to listen to Africans. See Erasto Muga, *African Response to Western Christian Religion: A Sociological Analysis of African Separatist and Political Movements in East Africa*, (Kampala: Nairobi: Dar es Salaam: East African Literature Bureau, 1975), 19-23.

¹¹ Mark R. Shaw, *The Kingdom of God in Africa: A Short History of African Christianity*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 1 - 328.

tended to come from two particular points of view and thereby are not comprehensive enough. One point of view represents the eyes of the missionaries in Africa, what Shaw calls 'missionary historiography'.¹² He rightly points out that, as valuable as this kind of history is, it falls short of telling the whole truth. It only shows one side; the part played by the missionaries and those Africans who have shown allegiance to them.¹³ The other point of view represents Africans who write as a response to the writings of the missionaries, namely, 'nationalist historiography'.¹⁴ The 'nationalist historiography' emphasises the role of African Christians, and in essence is an attempt to highlight the African achievement in planting indigenous churches in Africa. This reaction results in down playing western missionary activity in Africa.¹⁵ The book by Mark Shaw becomes significant here because it attempts to draw the picture of Christianity in Africa from the very beginning. It attempts to go beyond western missionary activity in Africa, as far back as to the Ethiopian eunuch who was converted just after the day of Pentecost. For this reason, this book should be read by those who long for a less biased history of the Church in Africa.¹⁶

African Christianity in Pre-Modern Missionary Activity in Africa

In Acts 8:26-39 a story is told of how the Ethiopian eunuch receives the gospel and after conversion is baptised. This Ethiopian man held a high office in the Ethiopian kingdom, and could have been the first evangelist to African people. The implication of this story perhaps is that African Christianity dates back to the first century AD.¹⁷ In the years following this conversion are Christian centres in the north of Africa. These centres played an essential role in the shaping of the Christian movement in the theologies of the church fathers. Mark Shaw traces the story of the first missionaries who ventured down south, to the

¹² *Ibid.*, 12.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ See Mark Shaw's book for examples of these two approaches in writing the story of the Church in Africa.

¹⁶ This book is less biased compared to other books on African church history in that the author has attempted to give an objective story. His use of the 'kingdom of God' as a story line which has given him the much-needed ground that gives the story some objectivity. See particularly pages 18-20.

¹⁷ Howard Marshall, *Acts: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 160. Marshall notes here correctly that, 'The story is included ... because it forms part of the gradual progress of the church towards the Gentiles.' Africans are undoubtedly part of God's plan of salvation.

lands of Ethiopia and Nubia.¹⁸ We go with his conclusion that the kingdom of God was in triumph in these lands.

In the Middle Ages Islam came along from the middle east and almost shocked off the Christian faith from north Africa, thereby cutting off the life-link of the African Church from the Roman Church.¹⁹ Whether or not there was a near total extinction of Christianity in Africa, the point being made here is that Islam played a major role in repressing it.

At the same time, the Europeans were beginning their exploration of the new worlds, for which a demand for slaves was created. Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal sought for new lands. There was a demand to destroy Islam economically, geographically and militarily.²⁰ This quest brought with it a struggle to control Africa. The Arabs fought to remain in Africa due to the trade and labour that they were getting from there, while the Europeans scabbled for the colonisation of Africa. The African became a commodity to be fought for and this complicated the reception of the Christian faith. Slavery and exploitation of the natural resources became the schemes of every day. This kind of climate further repressed Christianity which was almost wiped out already.

African Christianity in Modern Missionary Times

This period overlaps with the struggle to colonise Africa and to use every resource available in Africa, including her peoples. Yet, this period saw a growing Christianity as many people came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many Africans were sent to Europe for education and while there embraced western Christianity. It is reported that as early as 1500's Afonso, the king of the Congo, sent his sons to Europe to read Theology.²¹

African Traditional Religion (ATR) did not give in to Christianity that easily. There was a real struggle to root the Christian faith in Africa.²² Yet, ATR

¹⁸ See Shaw, 21-70.

¹⁹ See Shaw's argument that there is evidence for some Christianity in Africa even after the advent of Islam. The Ethiopian Church did weather the storm of Islam. *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, pp. 75-106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²² *Ibid.*, 113.

was not such a great threat²³ as was the foreign domination that overwhelmed the African people. The clash of western culture with African life left a permanent mark. There was an attempt to cut off the values that held African people together. Chinua Achebe, a prominent Nigerian writer, interpreted this succinctly when he wrote the novel, *Things Fall Apart*. In this novel, the champion of the village, Onkonkwo, dies a shameful death, after stating that western culture had cut off the chords that held them together.²⁴ Tite Tiénou laments the fact that the problem of African Christianity is 'underdevelopment'. This underdevelopment is to be blamed on the way the gospel was brought to Africa. Tiénou puts it thus,

Christianity came to the continent in the garments of western cultures. This western imprint on Christianity has had a negative effect on the development of African theology.²⁵

To add to what Tiénou brings out here would be an overstatement since he has said it all. Western imprint has continued to haunt African Christian Theology for a long time. There is, therefore, need for an African tailor made outfit of authentic and Bible based theology. This then leads us to the modern African Christianity.

African Christianity Today

Now it is time to enter the discussion of whether African Christianity is a 'mile long' and an 'inch deep'. This statement has been used as both a compliment and a criticism of African Christianity. It is a compliment in that it sees African Christianity as having seen an enormous growth in the past several decades, with most African countries being mostly Christian. This growth in numbers has however not been accompanied by spiritual depth, thus the conclusion that African Christianity is only an inch deep. The question before us here is whether this statement can be justified or not. Is African Christianity really so broad without any depth? What evidence is there for both its length and lack of depth? To answer these questions, this statement shall now be analysed

²³ This point will be addressed in the section dealing with the suggested methodology of reaching the African heart with the gospel.

²⁴ See the discussion by Tite Tiénou, 'The Right to Difference', *AJET* vol. 9.1 (1990), 24ff. In this article, Tiénou gives a short survey of the struggle of Africans to have 'the right to difference' and surveys the various reactionary developments in African Christian Theology. We are in agreement with Tiénou's conclusions.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

separately, beginning with the numerical growth and concluding with its lack of qualitative growth.

Is African Christianity a 'Mile Long'?

There is a reported steady growth of the number of Christians in Africa from 8 million (10% of the population) in 1900 to 275 million (57% of the population) in 1990.²⁶ This is confirmed by the fact that most of African nations have Christianity as the major religion.²⁷ Due to this significant growth of African Christianity in comparison to the rest of the world, one may be justified in seeing African Christianity as being a mile long. The question is, "Is it true that Christianity in Africa is a mile long?" It does seem to be longer than a mile, since there must be a comparison. If African Christianity is to be compared with western Christianity today, then there will be jubilation in Africa over the success of the Christian faith in this vast continent. The presence of the Kingdom of God in Africa today is undeniable.

If one were to look at several nations south of the Sahara for the presence of the Christian faith, he/she would be amazed by the numbers of people who attend Church every Sunday morning. Christianity has over 50% of the population of many countries in Africa today.²⁸ So, there could be some truth to the statement that 'African Christianity is a mile long'. However, this growth is alleged to be in numbers only, since it is assumed to be an inch deep. Although we are agreeable that African Christianity has shown a significant growth, we are not sure whether the same can be said about African Christian spirituality. To the question of the quality of African Christianity we now turn.

Is African Christianity an 'Inch Deep'?

The statement that 'African Christianity is a mile long' does not stop there, since it concludes by claiming that this same Christianity is an 'inch deep'. Is it true that there is a depth in African Christianity? Yes, a western evaluator would consent, "but not too deep". This same evaluator would seem to imply this

²⁶ Patrick Johnstone, *Operation World*, (Carlisle, UK: OM Publishing, 1993), 37. This translates to the growth of the number of churches and church members from 12% in 1960 to about 17% in the 1990s in comparison with the rest of the world. Patrick Johnstone, *World Churches Handbook*, (London: Christian Research, 1997), 15.

²⁷ Patrick Johnstone, reports that, 'Christians are in a majority in 30 countries'. This is a very significant statement since there are 55 countries in the continent of Africa. *Operation World*, 33 and 36.

²⁸ See Operation Mobilisation book *Pray for the World*.

by saying that African Christianity is an 'inch deep'. If African Christianity is not deep enough, who is to blame? Do we blame the African Christian or the missionary by whom the gospel came to Africa?

The depth here refers to the quality of African Christianity. To say that it is an inch deep is to imply that Africans in general have not allowed the gospel to control every part of their life. Various examples have been given in support of this assertion. One of these examples being that Africans accept the gospel but still cling to African traditional beliefs. A prayer item in *Operation World* sums up the argument that African Christianity is only an inch deep:

There are many big challenges for African Christians to confront in the '90's. 1. *Rapid growth* with an inadequate discipling. So great has been the harvest that non-Christian customs, worldviews and attitudes have invaded the Church. *Syncretism* is a major problem in many areas. Thoroughgoing repentance and renunciation of sin and the works of darkness is often lacking and many Christians are not free from the fear of witchcraft and evil spirits.²⁹

This prayer request may have some truth in its description, but it seems to put the blame on the rapid growth of Christianity in Africa. However, we are of the opinion that the problem lies in the way the gospel was brought to Africa. Hence the proposal for a rethinking of the missionary strategy to Africa. The solution could be found in the grounding of Christianity in Africa. The question to ask here is whether Christianity has found room in African soil.

If Richard Gehman is right in his conclusion that, "the Christian faith has been Africanised" (that is, "African believers are making their unique imprint on the Christian faith in the continent"),³⁰ then this same Christianity cannot be an inch deep. Gehman makes this conclusion in a response to John Mbiti's claim that, "Christianity has Christianised Africa, but Africa has not Africanised Christianity."³¹ These two scholars may be right if only they are to be understood in the context of the claim that 'African Christianity is a mile long and an inch deep.' Perhaps Gehman is emphasising the fact that Christianity has taken a grip on Africa in a vast way, with which Mbiti agrees. However, Mbiti notes that this Christianity has not gone deep enough within African life. There is room for further improvement, after which maybe whoever it is who sits in judgement

²⁹ Johnstone, *Operation World*, 37.

³⁰ Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology*, 109.

³¹ *Ibid.*

about this Christianity can add one more inch to its depth. This sort of argument adds some weight to the thesis of this paper, that there is need to rethink missionary strategy in Africa.

Nevertheless, before going further, it is now time briefly to survey briefly the missionary activity in Africa.

MISSIONARY ACTIVITY IN AFRICA: SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

This paper does not intend to give a full account of missionary work in Africa, but a short working history.³²

Success of Missions in Africa

The fact that there is a church today in Africa is a mark that western missions were a success. There were many missionary societies formed in the early part of the 19th century, which were enriched by young Christian scholars who were willing to leave the comfort of life and venture into what was known as the 'dark continent'. Towards the end of 19th century, several churches were planted and many Africans baptised.³³ Although many of these missionaries died as soon as they set foot on African soil due to malaria and other diseases, others did not hesitate to follow. The prospect of death for the missionary was so serious that Africa was considered the 'white man's grave'.³⁴

Africa will forever be grateful for the selfless sacrifice of the lives of these missionaries. Many churches were planted, many hospitals and schools were established. The Bible was put in the language of many African languages and African could hear God speak to them in their mother tongue. This was a great achievement, and it did help stamp Christianity firmly in African soil.

³² There are numerous books on the history of western missions in Africa. Any reader who wants to know beyond the brief account given here should feel free to consult these books.

³³ See Shaw's book for a fuller account for this successful adventure.

³⁴ See Dick Anderson, *We Felt like Grasshoppers*, 23, for details of the founder of the Africa Inland Mission, Peter Cameron Scott, who died one year after his arrival (31st December, 1896) and after walking over 2,600 miles in Kenya. The largest church in Kenya, the Africa Inland Church, was born out of the efforts of this dear missionary. This is only one example of many other western missionaries who sacrificed their lives for the sake of the gospel to reach African heart. The question is, did the gospel really reach the African heart?

Failure of the Missionaries in Africa

While not wanting to dwell on the failures of yesterday, these could be of great value in providing the vital lessons for today. The God for whom the missionaries worked always reminded His people of the deeds of yesterday as reminders for what He wants to do for them today. In the same way, the failures of the days gone-by should help in the process of re-thinking mission strategy to Africa and other cultures.

The first failure was a colour prejudice on the part of the African. That is, because the white man enslaved the African, any white man was identified as the enemy. The white missionary found himself in trouble caused by his fellow countryman. The missionary should not be blamed for this difficulty, since it was created by another person. Mark Shaw, however, reports of some missionaries in the Congo who participated in the slave trade.³⁵

Missionaries appeared to collaborate with the fellow white man to colonise Africa due to their acceptance to administer on behalf of colonial governments. This was a serious mistake on the part of the missionaries, since Africans could not differentiate between the colonial masters and the missionaries in many cases. They should not have agreed to compromise their position as the ministers of God's Word by becoming administrators for the colonial governments. Sadly, however, this point does not need a burden of footnotes to prove. The raising in arms of Africans against the colonial masters was in many cases interpreted as a revolt against the missionaries in Africa.³⁶

Some missionaries were not always a good example. Shaw again gives an account where missionaries were a distress to African Christians. He writes of Afonso as follows,

The Congo King wrote to King Manuel of Portugal, 'Today our Lord is crucified anew by the very ministers of his body and blood.'³⁷

³⁵ "The priests even joined with the slave-trading Portuguese settlers to oppose Afonso" Shaw, 113.

³⁶ It should be noted here that, many missionaries fought their own countries and countrymen for the sake of Africans. Moreover, in many cases those who became leaders in independent African nations had been sent abroad by the missionaries.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

Dr. Dick Anderson in his book, *We Felt Like Grasshoppers*, reports of missionaries and missions that could not work together.³⁸ The infighting between the missionaries left Africans puzzled, since these people had come to preach the same Jesus. Most of the missionary organisations carried their differences from home to the mission field. There was lack of a united front, instead as the political governments scrabbled to colonise Africa, the missionary societies scrabbled to plant their particular church denomination in Africa. Africa became a war zone and African Christianity was thus undermined.

In the fight for control, Africa was fought on all fronts. The nationals were not spared either, since the missionaries collaborated with the trusted nationals to unseat other nationals.³⁹ This kind of behaviour created unnecessary opposition, as the nationals were made to fight each other.

This led to missionaries making a value judgement on African culture without adequate knowledge. After conversion the African was removed from his home to the mission station, supposedly for his protection. This African was to be protected both from African culture and from his fellow Africans. "Wittingly or unwittingly, missions in Africa contributed to the making of the Black man into the White man."⁴⁰ African culture was replaced by the European culture, after which the African was considered to be fully converted. If there was such an achievement, this could have been the greatest failure. This could have been such a scandalous thing because to change someone's culture is to make such a person into a slave.

Lastly, when it was time for the missionaries to hand over places of responsibility, the trusted Africans were the beneficiaries of such posts. It did not matter whether these Africans were qualified for such jobs, the one all-important qualification was trust. Africans had to look trustworthy so that they could benefit from the missionaries. They were willing to pretend if only to achieve their goals. The missionaries could not listen to some nationals who knew each other well. This failure led to substandard leadership in the newly established churches. In addition, those nationals who were not satisfied with the activities of the missionaries began to establish the many independent churches that are in Africa today.

If then the African church is 'a mile long', the missionaries are to take the credit for this growth of the church in Africa. At the same time, if it is true that

³⁸ Dick Anderson, *We Felt like Grasshoppers*, 35f.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Tite Tiénou, 31.

African Christianity is an inch deep', then the missionaries are to accept graciously the blame for this lack of depth. However, this does not mean that we should heap all the blame upon the missionaries, since the African church has a part to play in its own growth. Nevertheless, the first teacher is very important, such that, what the missionaries planted in Africa is still being felt today. Therefore, there is a need to rethink our missionary strategy in Africa, for the sake of reaching the African heart with the gospel in an effective manner. To this rethinking, this paper now turns, with a repeat of the earlier warning that there are no 'quick-fix' answers to the issue.

THE KEY TO THE AFRICAN HEART:

A PREGNANT STATEMENT

This is the section which the paper is mainly concerned to address. What is the key to African heart? The African heart was defined earlier while African Christianity and missionary activities were briefly assessed. Now three main things will be dealt with in an attempt to suggest a possible key to the African heart.

The Heart of the Matter: Romans 10:9

Romans 10:9 presents the way of salvation. The first thing being that of confessing Jesus as Lord, followed by an act of believing in the heart that God raised Him up from the dead. Verse 10 goes on to clarify what is actually meant by the ninth verse. What is being confessed by the mouth should be what has already been believed in the heart. However, occasionally the mouth may confess what the heart has not really come to terms with, thereby making the confession ineffective. For Christianity to be an inch deep, would inevitably imply that what African mouth has confessed has not found room in the heart.

The term 'heart'⁴¹ appears in the New Testament (NT) over 149 times and some of these occurrences may be of help in the understanding of the importance that the heart plays in salvation. Jesus emphasised that only the

⁴¹ καρδία, ας, ἡ *heart*; in the New Testament, *the inner self* (1) viewed as the seat of physical vitality (AC 14.17); (2) viewed as the innermost man, the source and seat of functions of soul and spirit in the emotional life (AC 2.26), the volitional life (2C 9.7), the rational life (AC 7.23); (3) viewed as the human dwelling place of heavenly beings and powers (RO 5.5; 2C 1.22; EP 3.17); (4) fig. of the depths of the earth *interior, center* (MT 12.40). Taken from: *Bible Works Software*

pure in heart shall be able to see God (Matt. 5:7), because the heart is the seat of sin. Sin is planned in the heart, so sinful deeds are already committed in the heart before they are exposed (Matt. 5:28; 9:4; 11:29; 12:34; 15:18; 24:48; Mk. 7:21; Acts 8:21,22).

The heart is perceived in the NT as being where the treasure of the individual is located. Hence the advice by Jesus for his hearers to consider where the treasure was, since there their heart was (Matt. 6:21; Lk. 12:34). The heart is also the door (gateway) to the person (Matt. 13:15, 19; 22:37; Acts 2:37). God does open the heart so that the message of the gospel can come in (Acts 16:14). The Holy Spirit makes the love of God clear to the heart (Rom. 5:5).

This same heart can be far even when the mouth is in the process of praising God (Matt. 15:8; Mk. 6:52; Lk. 21:34). This is because in the heart originates all the doubts in the human life (Mk. 11:23). Therefore, the heart needs both the peace and the Word of Christ if it is to overcome these doubts (Col. 3:15,16).

Lessons from the Working Definition: All Layers Approach

From both the New Testament and the proposed working definition in this paper, the obvious point is that the heart plays a very significant role in salvation. Four layers were given above as a means of understanding African heart and now these layers will be applied to the communication of the gospel in Africa.

The first layer speaks of ability of the African heart to be conditioned by culture. The Lord has to deal with this layer since He only can open the heart for the gospel to enter (Acts 16:14). As the Lord opened the heart of Lydia in Acts, He is able to do the same to the African heart. God has already opened many conditioned layers of the African heart. The second layer as Mark Shaw notes in his book,⁴² instead of being in conflict with the gospel, aids it to come into African heart.⁴³ The African, being religious by nature, provides fertile soil for the gospel to germinate in his heart since God is not far from him.

⁴² Mark Shaw makes an important point here thus: "The reality is that . . . ATR... cultivated a widespread longing for the kingdom of God and for the sacred king that eventually led millions of Africans to seek their fulfilment in the redemptive reign of Christ." *The Kingdom of God in Africa*, 76.

⁴³Richard Gehman's fears, on the place of African Traditional Religion in the theology of African scholars over against the gospel, may be valid. Nevertheless, John Mbiti may be right in seeing ATR as being preparatory to the

The myth, which existed in the beginning of this century, has been proved wrong repeatedly. In this myth, the African was perceived as not being able to comprehend God, since God is a philosophical concept.⁴⁴ Whether God is a philosophical concept or not, the African heart is aware of Him all the time. The Supreme Being is very much a part of the life of the African person.⁴⁵ African heart is to be influenced by the indwelling Christ (Eph. 3:17) to forsake those beliefs that are contrary to the gospel.⁴⁶ These two layers are not to be forsaken or even replaced, since to do so is to kill the personality and identity of the person. The gospel does not come to destroy the person, but to restore him. To restore is not the same as to replace. The cultural and religious conditioning is to be taken advantage of in the communication of the gospel to the African.

The third layer is to be exploited too, since there are times when certain things are not necessarily harmful, yet not useful. It is important to have an accommodating heart, since many times there will be need to accommodate the views of others without resorting to war. The community lifestyle of an African enables him to develop this part of the heart, where others are accommodated regardless of whether they are acceptable or not. Paul tells the Corinthian believers to accommodate each other in order to build a Christian community (1Cor. 9).⁴⁷ However, there has to be a limit as to what can be accommodated. Syncretism is to be avoided at all costs.⁴⁸

The fourth layer if fed with the right doctrine will make the right decisions. The gospel has to remove the blindness that this layer may contain in

gospel. See Gehman's discussion in *Doing African Christian Theology: an Evangelical Perspective*, 44-75.

⁴⁴ Edwin W. Smith gives a very interesting clip of an encounter with Emil Ludwig. In this encounter Ludwig wondered how 'the untutored African can conceive of God' since to him 'Deity is a philosophical concept which savages are incapable of framing.' *African Ideas of God: A Symposium*, p.1.

⁴⁵ See the discussion in Richard Gehman, *African Traditional Religion in Biblical Perspective*, (Kijabe, Kenya: Kesho Publications, 1989), pp. 189-224.

⁴⁶ Alfred Muli's suggestion for African theology in his two-part article in *AJET* vol. 16.1 and 16.2 (1997) is very helpful in helping this part of African heart to be ruled by Christ.

⁴⁷ Paul gives his own life style where he has tried to be all things to all men for the sake of winning some to the kingdom of God. He must have had a big heart to accommodate the Jew and the Gentile, the weak and the strong (!)

⁴⁸ Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 270-283.

order to respond according to the standard of the gospel (Eph. 4:18). It is God who establishes His purposes in the hearts of the believers, and Africans are not an exception to that rule. Anybody interested in the health of African Christianity is to pray that the Lord would direct their hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ's second coming (2Thess. 3:5). The decision making layer is to be the utmost aim of the gospel, since if the gospel takes full control of this layer all other layers will be kept in order. This is the home of the Holy Spirit and all African Christians must of necessity make sure that this is so (Eph. 5:18). As with the Psalmist in Psalm 119:11, every believer is to make sure that the Word of God is firmly kept in this innermost layer.⁴⁹

Rethinking Missionary Strategy to Africa: A Partnership Approach

Writing in 1932, Rev. Alexander Hetherwick⁵⁰ gave a very interesting account from which the topic of this paper has been formulated in addition to Romans 10:9. It was a sunny day and Rev. Hetherwick, in the company of his friend, were making their way in African style, in a single file. For their comfort, several Africans had been gathered to shoulder the luggage. He describes these Africans in a most intriguing manner:

Accompanied by our gang of native carriers bearing our travelling equipment... in front of us tramped a burly native porter, bearing his load of fifty pounds, handling it as if it were little heavier than a football, now resting it on one shoulder, now lifting it on to the other, now raising it on to the grass pad he carried on his head... All the while he sang, and danced from foot to foot, keeping time with his song, and stopping, every now and then, to give his burden a friendly tap... Sinewy and lithe in his every movement and gesture, he gladly moved ahead of us...⁵¹

⁴⁹ Wilbur O'Donovan's book, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective*, (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1996) gives a commendable method of teaching theology in Africa that may achieve what is being proposed in this paper. It does address all the four layers of African heart and would be very helpful if only it had academic annotations for further study.

⁵⁰ Alexander Hetherwick, *The Gospel and African: The Croal Lectures for 1930-1931 on the Impact of the Gospel on a Central African People*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1932) pp. 1-176.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 1,2.

The two missionaries interpreted this native carrier as being very happy to do the job he was doing, due to his attitude. The friend of Hetherwick at this point expressed a wish to enter inside the heart of this carefree African. Hetherwick was quick to tell his friend and his reader that, for many years he had desired to enter inside the African heart without success.⁵² For him to enter African heart meant to think like an African, a thing he could not do, since there was a high wall between him and the African. He openly confesses that, "to think like an African thinks, 'thinking black'... is an achievement impossible to me as a white man."⁵³ To Hetherwick, African mentality is ruled by influences that are not evident to his western mindset of cause and effect.⁵⁴

In January 1966, a group of African theologians came together at Immanuel College, Ibadan, Nigeria. Their concern was expressed in the introduction to the book that came out of the papers presented. That is,

It has become increasingly clear, and disturbingly so, that the Church has been speaking in Africa and to Africans in strange or partially understood tongues. We must be thankful to God that in spite of man's weaknesses and short-sightedness, the miracle of grace has been taking place all over Africa. Nevertheless, we realise that both the tools and the method of evangelism as employed in this continent are now calling very loudly for a careful overhauling.⁵⁵

This paper comes out as a small response to this cry, a cry to enter the African heart effectively. This does not imply in any way that there hasn't been an effective ministry in Africa, but that there is need to do a better job, since anything that is worth doing should be done well. What is the best approach then? This is an elusive question; however, some suggestions could be at hand here.

There is a need to see African person as being God's creation and complete, except the part that is marred by sin. The African is a real person, whose dignity should be upheld at all costs. The gospel should not be a means

⁵² To be sure, Hetherwick says for 45 years he had failed to reach the African in the heart. *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, editors, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 9.

of destroying his personality, but a means of giving him full right to life. The ability to help him to realise that he does not need to be another person for the sake of salvation. To be a Christian does not mean to be westernised. There is no need to tell an African Christian or any African what he could have been in the last century.⁵⁶

There should be no reports of racial discrimination among Christians. The missionary should approach the people of other cultures with humility and respect.⁵⁷ There is a need to listen to the people before judging their values. If an African were to judge western Christianity today, he may be obliged to say it is less than an inch deep. The African person should be allowed to make a decision after understanding the implications of making that decision. If someone does not believe in the existence of the spirit world, then that person should listen to Africans who experience this world every day in their lives. The African does not need to be tutored in order to accept the existence of God, since to him, God has always been there. Way before the advent of Christian missions, God was already in Africa preparing the hearts of Africans for Jesus. The harvest is ready and ready for reaping.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper would urge all those who love Africa and Africans to spend some moment in prayer for guidance on how to reach such a people. It is only in such an attitude that the Holy Spirit is likely to set apart some of us to step out in faith to this vast continent with the news of hope (Acts 13:1-3). If we try by our own human means, the Spirit of Jesus may forbid us as He did to Paul in the region of Galatia (16:6,7).

Finally, there should be a two-sided challenge to both the messengers and the recipients. Let there be no attempts of reaction, where each group merely reacts to the other. The messengers should try their best to understand what really matters to the African heart. Listen carefully to Africans so that the

⁵⁶ A student from Redcliffe College complained of a white Christian telling him that if it were over 50 years ago he could have been a slave. This white brother continued to tell this African student that if he were to exchange his skin with him, he would not take it since he cannot go anywhere with a black skin. Such a student being a Christian in these post-modern days should not have such experiences. There seem to be few missionaries who are still operating with this colour prejudice.

⁵⁷ See the discussion on this view by Richard Gehman, *African Traditional Religion*, 285-290.

felt needs are met by the two parties. This calls for partnership in the gospel. Moreover, to Africans, it is now time we flew out of the hatching nests. It is time we determined to rise and teach our own people in languages that they can hear better. It is time we stopped looking to the west to solve our problems. The God, who has brought us Jesus and the Holy Spirit, is the same God who calls to action for His namesake. We should pray for boldness to face up to our problems and prove that our Christianity is deeper than anybody can endeavour to measure.