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# The Incarnation of Jesus Christ as a Hermeneutic for Understanding the Providence of God in an African Perspective

Gregg A. Okesson

*Gregg Okesson's experience in the African village has driven him to theological pursuit. He seeks to develop a hermeneutic for understanding God's involvement in the world, which rests upon the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and arises from within the African perspective. Mr. Okesson notes that in the Incarnation we see vividly the "nearness" of God. We witness his own calloused hands, the sweat dripping from his forehead, and intensive interactions with the poor, the lame, the diseased, and the oppressed. God-man lives in community, cares for his family and opens his soul to others (livable theology). The essential character of the incarnation demands that truth (God's truth) be lived. Incarnation signifies that the quality and substance of life was livable with meaning and value. The truths of the providence of God are lived in the person of Jesus Christ.*

## INTRODUCTION

The weary orb of the sun was slowly retreating behind the distant hills and waving a reddish farewell. The surrounding Tanzanian countryside pause to say, "goodnight," and basked for a final moment amidst the glimmering sky. I sat quietly amidst this wonder, drinking strong coffee with a few good friends. They were Rangi by tribe and I, American; they were born Muslim and I, Christian: we were as different as the fading sun is to the rising moon, but joined by circumstance, encounter, and life.

Our subject that evening was the Providence of God, though we could hardly have called it such. We spoke about life: simple pleasures and harsh

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realities. “Where will Kidyela find the proper wife and dowry?” “Why do people die of treatable diseases?” and “Where are the rains?” I had few answers that night, but mostly listened to these “bush theologians” wrestle with issues that have confounded generations.

It is impossible, or at least unrespectable, to live in community, walking in the footsteps of humanity – feeling her sorrows and joys – and to experience antipathy or indifference. My years in Africa have yoked me to the needs, the plight, and even the resiliency of the African. I have been moved to tears as well as to inspiration. Yet above all else, it has driven me to theological pursuit.

Theology, in its most rudimentary form, is the human quest for the “livable-ness” of the character of God within the world. As I sat that evening among my Rangî friends they were not concerned with mere theological speculation, but real life: truly, whom should Kidyela marry and where would he find the money for a dowry; what can be done to offset the epidemic of senseless deaths in our village; and what can actually be done to bring the rains. The emphasis is always upon life (action, pursuit, routine, and ritual) as it relates to the involvement of God in the world. This is likewise the content of the Providence of God.

There is an urgent need within our contemporary day for constructive African theologizing regarding the Providence of God. Specifically, we need a hermeneutic for understanding God’s relationship to the world that brings with it a “livable” interpretation to match the African spirit. The answers need to be tangible, felt, and real. In this article, I would like to begin a personal pilgrimage on the relationship between the Providence of God and the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. I hope to show that a proper understanding of the Incarnation, complete with an honest Christological perspective, brings a hermeneutic<sup>1</sup> for understanding God’s Providence within this continent, and then, perhaps, even to the rest of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> I am not implying that the Incarnation is synonymous with the Providence of God; merely that it is a needed and essential hermeneutic for understanding God’s continued activity within our world. The strength of the hermeneutic, as I seek to demonstrate, is that it is understood within flesh and bones, and livable in the same manner.

## THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

Can life make sense? Is life meaningful? How are we to live in light of God's involvement in the world? These are the questions of the Providence of God. The *Shorter Catechism* states, "God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own free will freely and unchangeably ordain whatever comes to pass."<sup>2</sup> Yet the doctrine of Providence is so much more than "foreknowledge," but involves God's active and directive involvement in the total history of humankind (involving creation, nation, community, and individuals) unto His purposes. Jean Calvin likewise agrees and states, "Let my readers grasp that providence means not that by which God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that by which, as keeper of the keys, he governs all events."<sup>3</sup>

Creation is the first act of providence. God created the world with His character and it is therefore saturated with His purposes. Providence is the ongoing manifestation and governance of the creation act, leading to His eschatological aims. Creation states that the world is "good" (Gen. 1:3, 9, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31); while providence states that this "goodness" is moving somewhere; specifically, God has not forgotten the essential character of creation, but is guiding the world to Himself and His glory.

The traditional doctrine of Providence<sup>4</sup> elaborates on the "How" of God's purposes in creation. It states that God's providence is manifested in His: (1) preservation of creation, (2) its governance, and (3) concurrence with humankind. Geoffrey W. Bromiley summarizes it as follows:

Providence, then, is the preservation, superintendence, and teleological direction of all things to God. It is divine governance whereby all possible

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<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3, section 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Institutes*, 1.16.4. Furthermore, against the "practical deism" of our day, Calvin states that the nature of this governance is "a watchful, effective, active sort engaged in ceaseless activity." *Institutes*, 1.16.3.

<sup>4</sup> There is no authoritative definition of Providence, but that which has arisen through the pages of Christian tradition. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1.22.1.

events are woven into a coherent pattern and all possible developments are shaped to accomplish the divinely instituted goal.<sup>5</sup>

First of all, preservation illustrates that God's creation act is continued and sustained by His Presence and character. If God were to remove His presence or spirit from the world all would cease to exist (Job 34:14). Yet modern post-enlightened developments in science have undermined this traditional position. They no longer look to the author of creation for its sustaining character, even as they no longer look to God for the cause of creation. Everything is explained in rational "enlightened" terms. G. C. Berkouwer states,

The enlightened scientific mind has come to look on the Providence doctrine more or less as a bromide convenient for pre-scientific naivete, but not rendered unpalatable by the 'deeper insights' of the scientific method.<sup>6</sup>

Providence is no longer necessary because God is no longer necessary. Yet when we say that God preserves His creation, we are thereby describing much more than a scientific ideology, we are stating that creation is pregnant with purpose. Stanley Grenz states that "when we confess God as the agent in preservation, we are providing the divine answer to the question, 'Is there meaning to life?'"<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, God's creation requires His governance. This second element of providence illustrates a deeper and more meaningful involvement in the history of the world. God is moving His creation somewhere and is actively involved in the ordinary acts of the world, as well as the extraordinary. While modern humanity has questioned the first act of providence, they have scoffed at this second act. How can God be good, when His creation is so littered with acts of aggression, evil, injustice, and oppression? Either God isn't good, or He is impotent against the forces set against His creation. Ultimately, modern humanity must either become atheists and

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<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 1020.

<sup>6</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 18.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 119.

deny God; become animists and by-pass God; or they must fashion another god in whom to worship.

As Christians, we must find those solutions unacceptable and work to explain our God who is indeed the governor of all creation. We must face difficult questions with intellectual honesty and candor as we worship – and therefore testify – to a God who works sovereignly within the world to accomplish his purposes. In no realm is this more essential than within African Theology.

Finally, the third act of providence takes God to the very deepest realms of humankind: to partnership with humans in life. There is an inherent mystery with concurrence, which baffles the most honest believer. Concurrence refers to “the cooperation of the divine power with creaturely powers allowing or causing them to act as they do.”<sup>8</sup> The pages of Scripture are alive with illustrations of a God who “cooperates” or “walks” with humanity. This is the most difficult of the acts of providence for contemporary humans to acquiesce. In one sense, it seems to infringe upon their “freedoms” and so they rebel against it; yet on the other hand, it is permissive of interaction and involvement, and so acceptable (or should we say desirable) to our human yearnings. In the final outcome of contemporary society, however, God has become irreconcilably maimed or defaced by the first two acts of providence to leave this final aspect of providence as inevitably irrelevant.

Regardless of how the contemporary world views God, and therefore providence, we must not despair, but must seek to retrieve a foundational basis for our faith that worships God in all three facets of his involvement with creation.<sup>9</sup> Specifically, we need to develop a hermeneutic for understanding God’s involvement in the world, which rests upon the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and arises from within the African experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Grenz, p. 122.

<sup>9</sup> Calvin says, “that ignorance of providence is the ultimate of all miseries; the highest blessedness lies in the knowledge of it.” *Institutes*, 1.17.11.

## **THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD IN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE**

In so far as we have described the providence of God in terms of His involvement in history, in no place is this doctrine more readily tested and needed than in Africa. First of all, it is a doctrine that comes with readied and proven assent from the Traditional African Religion. John Mbiti says about providence, "This is one of the most fundamental beliefs about God."<sup>10</sup> There is an irresistible link between the African and creation that seeks and needs the providence of God. "It is widely believed that God shows his providence through fertility and health of humans, cattle and fields, as well as through plentifulness of children, cattle, food and other goods."<sup>11</sup> It is based upon a concept of God whereby He is still involved in His creation; albeit sometimes from a distance.

Secondly, the African operates daily within the fundamental fabric of human life. In the West, we have become so "advanced" that we have often forgotten the very essence of human existence: rain, sun, food, health, work, play, children, and belonging. We attempt to circumvent the seasons and bypass the natural order of things; in a word, it has led to dysfunctionality. In Africa, this is not only life, but also the very realm and theater of God's involvement and disclosure of Himself to humanity (1 Sam. 2:6-8; Mt. 5:45; Acts 14:17). The red, dusty soil is alive with the footprints of life; calloused hands testify to the doctrine of concurrence at its most basic level; family and belonging are spiritual institutions governed by the creator of all things.

Thirdly, Africans have suffered more than most other people in our contemporary day. They have experienced the ravages of sinful humanity against them in warfare, slavery, oppression, and exploitation; they endure the unpredictability of the seasons and its subsequent affect upon crops, cattle, and food; they are inflicted with disease, poverty, and rampant death. If the doctrine of providence can be revealed to disclose God's purposes and involvement within humanity in Africa, perhaps it can be proven anywhere.

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<sup>10</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann Publishing, 1969), 41.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

Finally, there is a great need for the development of such a doctrine to arise from the substance of this hard, red soil. The Western world needs the theological offerings from this resilient land; in fact, even Africans need to tighten the reins of understanding between God's creation and His continued involvement in the world. The affects of Western modernism have washed upon the African beaches and brought a wave of questions foreign to this land; indigenous African beliefs have wrought their own havoc; and the growing tide of religious pluralism continues to push inland and bring competing ideologies. The fundamental character of God's providence is being tested in new and in old ways, leaving the lingering questions: "Is there meaning in this decaying world?" and, "How are we to live in light of the seeming disparity between God and His creation?" "Man either spends his years in orgy, continues his tedious way in boredom, or bows his head in submission to the tyranny of a pitiless fate."<sup>12</sup> Despair lead to doubt, doubt to fatalism, fatalism to nihilism, and nihilism gives birth to a lowered sense of human existence.

The Christian church needs to stand amidst this cycle of dread and proclaim the voice of a God who cares, who is involved, and who is sovereign in all ways – even (and especially) amidst the mundane of African life. Yet the problem is that we as Christians have forgotten, or dismissed, this most urgent of doctrines. We have our own hidden questions that lie festering under a cloak of cover. We have sacrificed the doctrine of providence upon the altar of intellectual agnosticism and retreated behind the façade of sweeping generalizations such as, "God is sovereign." While true, and voiced emphatically, they leave the world with the growing verdict that we are desperately naïve and our God is apparition of our deepest needs and desires.

Where does this leave us? Do we have the courage, as Africans, to stand amidst the confluence of internal and external forces and proclaim a God who continues to preserve, govern, and concur with humanity and His world? Do we have the intellectual curiosity and candor to seek a faithful God who does not conform to a super-sensible world?<sup>13</sup> And are we willing to live the results of our inquiry? Yes, we must. The church in Africa must accept the calling and mantle of the prophet of God to the nations. And, like

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<sup>12</sup> Berkouwer, 22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

the classical prophets, the church must be willing to live the truth in observable, tangible, and sometimes, dramatic ways. The answer to our dilemma, as well as the "livableness" of this truth, is found within the person and incarnation of Jesus Christ. He is much more than a typology, but a hermeneutic that brings meaning and purpose within a world seemingly out of control.

## INCARNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Much has been written regarding African Christologies in recent days.<sup>14</sup> The remainder of the article is not just another Christology, but rather a hermeneutic for understanding God's involvement in His world. Furthermore, it is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather an introduction to the viability and necessity of the Incarnation for understanding the doctrine of Divine Providence. Many more questions than answers will be submitted in hopes of soliciting interest and theological inquiry regarding the relationship between these doctrines of the faith.

There are few who have looked at the interplay between the Incarnation and the Providence of God. To many, it is a logical absurdity to answer a difficult and confusing doctrine with a more confusing one. A few, however, believe as I, that the doctrine of Providence cannot rest upon any other foundation. "We must resist the temptation to think about Providence generally and independently of Christ . . . In Jesus Christ, God has set up the relationship between Himself and His creatures, promising to carry through His purpose in creation to its triumphal conclusion."<sup>15</sup> A hermeneutic is a lens by which we understand. If Christ is God's consummate revelation of Himself to a sinful world, we must endeavor to

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<sup>14</sup> To list a few: "The Figure of Jesus in African Theology," in *Christian Identity*, ed. Christian Duquoc Casiano Floristan Samanes, and James Aiteken Gardiner, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988): 73-79; Gwinyai Muzorewa, "Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective," in *Africa Theological Journal* 17:3 (1988): 255-64; and also Matthew Schoffeleers, "Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm," in *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19.2 (1989): 157-83.

<sup>15</sup> T. H. L. Parker, "Providence of God" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 890.

interpret this lens for all subsequent interactions of God and mankind. To do otherwise would be irresponsible.

Jesus Christ is involved in all three traditional acts of Divine Providence. First of all, in the act of preservation, New Testament writers not only describe the pre-existent Christ as the force behind creation, but also the sustaining Word that holds the creation together. He is always active, always involved. The Gospel of John as Him saying, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working (5:17)" Likewise, the author of Hebrews states, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by His powerful word (1:3)." In this case, the division between preservation and governance may be fluid, for the words used of Jesus' sustaining power are '*pheron te ta panta to remati tes dunameos autoun.*' Jean Calvin states that the use of *pheron* "to uphold or to bear" means here to preserve or to continue all that is created in its own state; for he intimates that all things would instantly come to nothing, were they not sustained by his power.<sup>16</sup> While other commentators cite that the meaning of *pheron* implies that the "Son's work of upholding involves not only support, but also movement. He is the one who carries all things forward on their appointed course."<sup>17</sup> In either case, the indication is that it is Jesus Christ who is involved in the ongoing work of God and His world.

In the same way, Paul speaks emphatically to the interconnection between Jesus Christ as creator, Jesus Christ as the purpose of creation, and Jesus Christ as the sustainer/governor of creation (Col. 1:15-20). This passage is perhaps the most involved in tying together the functions of Jesus Christ and the World: "For by him all things were created . . . all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church . . . and through him to reconcile to himself all things . . . by making peace through his blood shed on the cross." It is beyond the purposes of this article to delve into an intensive exegetical study of the meaning and syntax of this passage; merely to call to attention the clearly stated involvement of Jesus Christ in creation and history.

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<sup>16</sup> Jean Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Library, 1980), 664.

Furthermore, the New Testament writers were eager to speak about the Christians' hope, meaning, and involvement in the world with the terms of union "*en Kristo*." If Jesus Christ is the preserver of creation, and the governor of the entire world, then it follows that Christians are to actively seek to find their fulfillment "*en Kristo*." "Such union entails not only mental assent to a set of doctrines, but also the embodying in our beliefs, attitudes, and actions the meaning and values that characterize Jesus' own life."<sup>18</sup> What therefore does it mean to "follow" Christ? What is the connection between the exalted Christ and the Holy Spirit? These are natural questions that surround the deeper implication of Jesus as preserver and governor of creation.

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly, Jesus Christ is the very personification of the doctrine of concurrence. If, in the Old Testament, God walked with humanity, cooperated with their endeavors, sent prophets, built up and tore down kingdoms, and otherwise interacted with humanity, then, in Jesus Christ we have the consummation of God's concurrence: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us (Jn. 1:14)." The implications of the incarnation are unsettling, as well as transforming. What does it mean for the history of humanity that God became man? What does it mean for us that God has stooped to our level and emptied Himself for us? God lived fully within the garb of humanity and God gave Himself as a human sacrifice for our sins. We cannot hide such issues from the doctrine of Divine Providence. If the three-fold traditional doctrine of providence illustrates an increasingly deeper commitment and involvement of God in the lives of humanity, then, the Incarnation embodies that concept and gives it tangibility and "realness."

## AFRICAN INCARNATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Let us return to the practical "liveability" of the doctrine of Providence in the African context. We have already observed the fertile soil in Africa for a development of the doctrine of Divine Providence; in fact, the top soil already exists. Mbiti says that "the omnipresence of God is expressed as protective, sustaining, upholding, saving, and healing."<sup>19</sup> Yet, there is something lacking; something that is deficient and unproductive: God's

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<sup>18</sup> Grenz, 121.

<sup>19</sup> Mbiti, 42-3.

Providence supersedes the entire world, but it is distant and largely independent of humanity. Mbiti proceeds to say, "His providence functions entirely independently of man, though man may and does at times solicit God's help."<sup>20</sup> In the Incarnation we see vividly the 'nearness' of God. We witness His own calloused hands, the sweat dripping from his forehead, and his intensive interactions with the poor, the lame, the diseased, and the oppressed. God-man lives in community, cares for his family, and opens his soul to others. This is not liberation theology, but livable theology. It is much more than a paradigm for God's Providence, it is in fact the very essence of His providential dealings with humanity.

The remaining part of the article will illustrate the practical nature, and implications of such a hermeneutic. The following are topics, which bid the reader to greater exploration; they are not intended to fully answer, but to entice.

### **CHRIST'S HUMANITY**

The contemporary Christian world has suffered a slow and gradual movement toward docetism. It has happened not from intention but from reaction. Early twentieth century Christianity saw the rise of an aggressive form of liberalism. It arose from the enlightenment and was spurred by optimistic modernism that saw the benefits and success of the human mind and spirit. Despite its theological failings, this movement carried a strong emphasis toward social and political action. At the core of its theological underpinnings was a dismissal of the supernatural: Christ was elevated as a man, but only at the expense of his deity. He was a strong role model, the leader of a movement against the oppressed, the very paragon of goodness - but not God.

In reaction, evangelicals championed His deity with a frantic and fervent spirit. They called themselves 'fundamentalists' as they sought to restore the interpretation of Scripture to its pre-enlightened condition. Above all else, Jesus is God and not to be tampered with.

We can applaud these defenders of the faith and even see within our modern theology their distinctive and formative impression. Yet, in the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

flurry of defending Jesus' deity, perhaps, we have made Him a little less man. We would never question the hypostatic union, or our creedal statements, but in practical implementation of theology, he just now "seems" like a man.

If our understanding of God's Providence is inextricably tied to our hermeneutic of the Incarnation, then, we need to work to restore a proper understanding of Jesus' humanity. How would it affect subsequent African theology to see God as a man who lives like us? How might it affect our churches if we see that God intervened into the world in order to save the world "through his life" (Rom. 5:10)? As Irenaeus and Athanasius have taught us, God's humanity is essentially soteriological in nature. What implications does this have for how we view salvation? Eternity? and the Kingdom of God?

Our view of salvation tends to mirror our view of Jesus' Character.<sup>21</sup> If he is divine, then, he came to be human in order to die on the cross and redeem our sins; if he is human, then, the cross-event is secondary to the fabric of the kind of life he lived. Yet, can we not strive to weave these truths together? Is not salvation past, present and future-tensed? And what does it mean to our humanity that the second Adam, our representative man, lived fully on our behalf?

Jesus became man and consummated Divine Providence within his flesh and bones. This truth needs to permeate our churches and affect our theology. It is truth that has been lived, fully. We need to develop an accurate (biblically and experientially) humanization of God, because truth must be lived.

## **THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY**

If Christ's humanity teaches us anything it is that humanity is sacred. There is an enormous difference between saying that humanity is sacred and saying that humanity is divine. God became man not in order that man

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<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to Nigel M. de S. Cameron and his book, *Are Christians Human: An Exploration of True Spirituality*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Cantilever Books, 1988).

could become God, but so that man could become truly man.<sup>22</sup> Yet, this humanity is not divorced from his death and resurrection: we must endeavour to see His life as a whole.<sup>23</sup> As humans, we have been deceived. We have become convinced that true humanity, as we know it in its fallen state, is the only humanity that exists. We have been duped and our confusion has turned to slumber. In Jesus Christ, the effects of the Fall have been reversed and Christ recreates humanity (Rom. 5:12-21). His life matters, and His death and resurrection affects those blessings onto us. Paul repeatedly refers to “eternal life” and the “reign of life” which arises from the second Adam: is this life only “not yet” or can we also say that it is realized eschatology? Irenaeus, in his treatise on “Redemption and the World to Come” says,

As the blessed Paul says in the Epistle to the Ephesians, that we are members of his body, of his flesh and his bones. He does not say this about a [merely] spiritual and invisible man, for the spirit has neither bones nor flesh, but about [God’s] dispensation for *the real man* (emphasis mine), [a dispensation] consisting of flesh and nerves and bones, which is nourished by his cup, which is his blood, and grows by his bread which is his body.<sup>24</sup>

If it is true that God in Christ redefines and restores humanity (the real man) to its intended state, why are we living as if we held no prospect for the “abundant life?” When we live without His purposes, that is to say, without the purposes of the Incarnation, then, we live as less than humans. The doctrine of Providence teaches us that life is important; the incarnation of Christ reveals the depth and extent of that value.

We are infinitely valuable and “being saved” by the life of Jesus Christ: not merely in imitation, but through the work of the Holy Spirit to reveal

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<sup>22</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, (New York: Collier Books, 1949).

<sup>23</sup> Bonhoeffer proceeds to say, “Only in the cross of Christ, that is, as those upon whom sentence has been executed, do men achieve their true form.” (78) And also, “The risen Christ bears the new humanity within Himself, the final glorious ‘yes’ which God addresses to the new man . . . Only the form of Jesus Christ confronts the world and defeats it. And it is from this form alone that there comes the formation of a new world, a world which is reconciled with God.” (79)

<sup>24</sup> Irenaeus, “Redemption and the World to Come,” Book V of *Against Heresies*, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. by Cyril C. Richards, (New York: Collier Books, 1970), 102-106.

and glorify Christ within us. Yet, he is our teacher, our mentor, and even our healer. His life upon this earth is not to be discarded as a necessary "evil" but as a means for our salvation. "Our humanity is not something that comes between us and God, it is precisely in our humanity that we are called bearers of the divine glory, the means by which God is made known."<sup>25</sup> Therefore, humanity matters; human life is worth living. If God's Providence teaches us that the world (and specifically humanity) is moving somewhere, then, our humanity as Christians ought to be in the very centre of those purposes.

There is, of course, a tension inherent within humanity. While created as good, the effects of the Fall still wage against us and distort the true intention for which we were created. In the words of Martin Luther, we are *Simul iustus et peccator*: at once righteous and a sinner. C. S. Lewis gives us an insightful glimpse into this tension as Aslan, the Christ-figure lion, says to Caspian, "You come of Lord Adam and the Lady Eve . . . And that is both honor enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders of the greatest emperor on earth. Be content."<sup>26</sup>

How might it affect the African church to view humanity in this light? The answers that matter must not come from me, a Westerner, but from you, the Africans. We must look at the rich African concepts of brotherhood and community and ask, "How does a renewed and redefined Christological humanity affect these traditional concepts? How might it affect the underlining inferiority by which, Africans view themselves in relation to the Western world? Or, how do we view humanity in relationship to spirits and the supernatural world? We must be vigilant to not repeat the same theological mistakes arising from the West, yet to interpret God's interaction and embodiment of humanity in such a way that truly elevates humanity to His purposes, and not to our own.

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<sup>25</sup> Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 252.

<sup>26</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, (New York: Collier Books, 1951), 211-12. (1969 reprint, p.218).

## THE PROBLEM OF EVIL (THEODICY)

As previously stated, the world has discarded the doctrine of Divine Providence as completely irrelevant and as an indictment upon God Himself (should he exist). The primary piece of evidence used against God is reality. "Look around the world," they say, "and view the evil that has infested our land – can you still maintain that God is good, or powerful, or that his use of evil people is just?" "Everywhere profound doubts have risen as to the reality of God; men not only deny Providence over all things, but ridicule the idea by pointing to the reality around us."<sup>27</sup>

Even recently, as I was researching this topic, terrorists commandeered four commercial airlines in America and crashed themselves and their passengers into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon, and a remote field in Pennsylvania. The entire world took a collective gasp at his horror. How could such evil happen? Where was God? Is there any hope left for humanity? Theodicy (the problem of evil) was the discussion one night on the popular call-in show, *Larry King Live*. There was a panel discussion between a Catholic Priest, a Jewish Rabbi, a Muslim Imam, and two Evangelical Christians. The dialogue was civil and respectful until one of the Evangelical Christians spoke about the person of Jesus Christ as the only answer for the evils of our day. Immediately he was accosted as intolerant and bigoted.

Why does the person of Jesus Christ solicit such a response? Is it the character of Christ, or is it the mechanics of his followers? I think, perhaps, it is both. The Providence of God has never before been more essential as the teetering wheel of humanity spins hopelessly out of control. In so far as the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is our hermeneutic for understanding Divine Providence, it is undeniably essential for our dialogue with theodicy.<sup>28</sup>

First of all, we must understand a God who creates the world and then answers the evils of the world with himself. It is providence in its most spectacular form. Yet because God answered it with Himself, He has left

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<sup>27</sup> Berkouwer, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Millard Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1991).

little room for other models of redemption. To the world, this is arrogant.<sup>29</sup> We might plead with our accusers that they are missing the true point: that God Himself suffered and died for us, but our pleas have fallen on deaf ears, because Christ proclaims himself the answer.

We need to stand unwaveringly to the truth of the Incarnation and the character of Christ Himself. Yet, this is not the sole reason behind the antagonism that exists in Jesus' Name, for we ourselves are often to blame. The essential character of the incarnation demands that truth (God's truth) be lived. In terms of Providence we might call it "Incarnated Concurrence." Following Jesus' death, His disciples were gathered by themselves within a locked room; for fear of their lives. Jesus walked amongst them, His hands deeply gashed, His brow visible with the imprint of thorns, and He said, "Peace be with you!" After this He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit (Jn. 20:19b-22)." In what way were the disciples sent? Is this sending only for them, or also for us who are filled with the Holy Spirit?

This is my point, in the same manner as God sent his son into the world to redeem the world, so also are we sent with the Good News. Perhaps the most essential aspect of understanding theodicy is that God's message in Jesus Christ must be lived, walked, and consumed into the entire landscape of humanity. Sometimes people reject the love and justice of God as represented by Christ because of the character of Christ Himself, but many times they reject Christ because His followers are not living even as He did. They are not suffering with humanity, their theology is sterile and confined to abstract arguments, they are not feeding the poor and clothing the naked, and there is little patience for the searchings of humankind. Contrary to the fundamental character of the Incarnation, we are not "dwelling amongst them" and so we are limiting the extent of Christ's exalted "sending" of humanity.

The answers to theodicy are not so simple, but much difficulty and confusion can be avoided if Christians simply lived the truth of God's

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<sup>29</sup> I am indebted to Lesslie Newbigen for his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 27-38.

interaction in the world: concurrently, deeply, fully, and with purpose and reliance upon the Holy Spirit. God would not send us in His manner if he did not stand beside us in His mission. God's character in Jesus Christ is missiological and transformation into perfect *shalom*.

## HUMAN RESPONSIBILITY

How do we balance the Providence of God and human responsibility? How do we live between the precipices of human trust and human fatalism? Recent history has painfully revealed the inherent dangers of Post-enlightened optimism, as well as Post-modern neglect. Providence, in the Person of Jesus Christ, stands boldly between the two and bids that humans live in quiet submission, yet, dutiful responsibility and care. Divine Concurrence does not state that we are invaluable to God's purposes, but it does involve us all the same. Calvin states,

Now it is very clear what our duty is: thus, if the Lord has committed to us the protection of our life, our duty is to protect it; if he offers helps, to use them; if he forewarns us of dangers, not to plunge headlong; if he makes remedies available, not to neglect them.<sup>30</sup>

Yet Calvin can likewise say,

Therefore, since God assumes to himself the right (unknown to us) to rule the universe, let our law of soberness and moderation be to assent to his supreme authority, that this will may be for us the sole rule of righteousness, and the truly just cause of all things.<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, our role in Divine Providence is, in this regard, different than Christ's role in the Incarnation. In Him, God fully and perfectly used Himself as essential to His end; in us He does the same, yet, without obligation or reliance. This should result in deep gratitude, mixed with fearful worship and reverence.

We need to develop this understanding even as the threats of human optimism, fatalism, and even animism continue to force inroads into our churches. God's Providence has suffered greatly from neglect, and with it

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<sup>30</sup> *Institutes*, 1.17.4.

<sup>31</sup> *Institutes*, 1.17.2.

we see the effects of theological abandonment. In Africa, it is evidenced by the rampant self-help and prosperity Gospel, which is sweeping across this land; theological determinism, which amounts to a spiritual version of fatalism; and perhaps mostly, agnosticism: in which we simply don't care.

The pressing needs of the Gospel in our churches must travel the precipitous pathway of God's Providence and human responsibility. The pages of Scripture are alive with vivid accounts of the interplay between the two and we must not cower before the difficult questions, which will arise along the path. Jesus Christ, the Incarnated God, walks alongside us and in His Spirit we are led into the very depths of God (1 Cor. 2).

## CONCLUSION

Before I lived in Tanzania, I knew and understood that the Incarnation compelled me to be sent, and to live amongst humanity with the truth of the Gospel. Until I lived amongst the Rangi, I little understood the sweeping implications of what this lifestyle might mean. In the years that followed, our lives were consumed by the African landscape: we ate, slept, and walked amongst the Rangi with little or no barriers between our life and theirs. We grew to feel their feelings and to indwell their culture (in as much as it is possible for a Westerner to do). We suffered vicariously, and sometimes directly alongside them, and rejoiced in the same manner. We saw the fragility of human nature as well as their resilience and dignity. The Gospel became so much more to us than words communicated across a faulty language medium, but indwelled truth walking alongside them.

In this context, nothing was outside the scope of the Gospel. The very fabric of human existence came alive with meaning and implications: from the hardened, thorn-infested paths to the daily routine and ritual of life. The whole process or experience was more than spiritual, but incarnational, signifying that the quality and substance of life was livable with meaning and value. Kidyela's search for a wife, the tragedy of senseless death, and the issue of the rains came back to me as something much more than mere abstract theology, but daily existence lived purposely under the Providence of God.

What is more, I grew disheartened by the theological answers that arose from amongst Islam. They were cold, stale, and distant. In fact, the people

sub-consciously agreed by their insistence upon consulting the spirits for answers that arose when Allah was silent. Finally, the Muslim incantation "*En Shallah*" frightened me with similarities that I myself had noticed within mainstream evangelicalism in the West. What do we mean when we say, "As God wills?" or "God is sovereign, don't worry." I am not contesting the invaluable truth of God's sovereignty, just the way in which we understand and live it amidst everyday existence.

We need a new hermeneutic for understanding God's relationship with His creation. In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ we have much more than a methodology, we have a Person. The significance of this statement cannot be undermined. In a methodology, we have a human creation made to understand the divine. It can be manipulated and forced to fit our preconceptions and subconscious desires, yet is barely livable within the fabric of everyday human life. In the Incarnation, we have just the reverse: the divine living within humanity. As divine, He discloses to us through life the very character of God Himself; as human, He cannot be manipulated and forced into comfortable categories, and the truths that exist from His character cannot be understood apart from everyday life. The truths of the Providence of God are lived in the Person of Jesus Christ.

• What does all of this mean for African Theology? I appeal to Christians, especially those involved in theological education, to help me answer this question, and, what is more, to implement it within the churches, communities, and houses that litter the African landscape. Paul asks that valuable Providential question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? (Rom. 8:35)" Then he answers his own question by appealing to the created order: "... neither death, nor life, neither angels, nor demons, neither the present nor future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv.38-39). Perhaps let us indulge upon Paul and ask the complimentary question, "How shall we see the love of Christ?" Can we answer triumphantly within the doctrine of Providence, "... within death and life, within angels and demons, within the present and the future, and any powers, within height and depth, and anything else in creation, we will be able to live within the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." This, my friends, is the providence of God.

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