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Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY:
Crisis in Exegesis or Ignorance?

An AJET Editorial

The biblical theology within the universal church of God in the African continent seems to be undergoing a crisis in the exegesis of scripture which results in ignorance and/or misinterpretation of the word.

The book of Hosea rightly cautions that "my people are dying because of lack of knowledge" (4:6). What kind of knowledge is this when on every corner of the streets of African major cities we hear the preaching and declaration of God's word? Again on the country side, many preachers loudly speak the word very early in the morning waking up those who may want to enjoy a few moments of sleep. It seems one crisis experienced in biblical and theological education precipitates another and so goes the rhythm. Just as a market is flooded with a variety of goods and services, so there are a variety of crises that biblical preachers must consider if they need to reach the world and transform it for God's glory. These crises include: the crisis of exegesis; hermeneutics; homiletics; and single and multiple meaning of a text.

The reason for this is that some of the preachers in theological education are called by God, others have called themselves (fame, funds and no/little training) and still others are called by the devil himself. All these seem to compete and the result of their callings is the discrepancies we observe in church ministries: lack of knowledge, hence shallow understanding and a misdirection of the congregants; misinterpretation of scripture, done only to suit personal persuasions; and a dichotomy between the word and the life of the preacher and the community of believers.

In the lead article, Dr. Stephanie L. Black, discusses the struggle to connect the 'academic and 'Spiritual' (the Word and Spirit) aspects of Biblical interpretation by African theological students, a tension that she points out that St. Augustine of Hippo wrote extensively about. According to St. Augustine, the biblical interpreter should understand God's blend of spiritual and human means in communicating truth; cultivate a humble

Christ-like character; have a working knowledge of the whole Bible; and respect the 'rule of faith.'

In the second article the author, Moses N. Ng'ang'a, uses a case study of Molo constituency, Kenya to discuss the implications of Acts17:24-28 for resolving tribal conflicts. He points out five major factors that promote a negative ethnicity: political, economic, moral, cultural and industrial; stating that the first two have had an increased animosity which has resulted into violence in the area. He calls on the church "to take up the challenge of engaging this problem for she has a key to resolving this problem albeit in the coming generation of Kenyans who have not drank the venom of ethnic hatred" (p.37). There is need to study the Bible in order to arrive at theology that will address such situations, for example, people need to understand the sovereignty of God; unity of the human race; and God's purpose in ethnic diversity. He emphatically concludes that, "The answer to this [problem] lies not in the separation of warring communities but rather in true and genuine healing based on the theology of Acts 17:24-28," which "every church needs to understand, teach and act upon" (p. 43).

Exceptionally relevant, practical and substantive is the third article on *Theological Education and Character.* Dr. Keith Ferdinando rightly cautions in the opening sentence that, "Theological educators of all people should be aware of the critical importance of character in the preparation of those who will lead the people of God" (p.45). Focusing on four biblical passages, he reflects briefly on what Jesus intended, what the truth of the word should produce, what ministry requires and what teaching demands in theological education. The article seeks to strongly suggest that the *why* character should be perhaps *the* central concern, for any serious programme of theological education.

Quite timely and interesting is the next article on ancestor Christology. It is based on a grassroots level survey research of the traditional theology of TEKAN and TCNN that characterize the mainline Nigerian Christianity, the author, Dr. Timothy Palmer, documents reflections on the idea of Jesus Christ being our ancestor as has been proposed by a number of significant African theologians in the last three decades. He enumerates these theologians' concepts of an ancestral Christ, many of whom come from the Catholic background, Dr. Palmer asks: 'how does the concept of Christ as ancestor resonate with the ordinary African Christian?'(p.67).

Augustine's Hermeneutics: Back to the Future for 'Spiritual' Bible Interpretation?

Stephanie L. Black

ABSTRACT

African theological students often struggle to connect the 'academic' and 'spiritual' aspects of biblical interpretation. Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) wrote extensively about this tension between Word and Spirit. In Augustine's view, the biblical interpreter should understand God's blend of spiritual and human means in communicating truth; cultivate a humble Christ-like character; have a working knowledge of the whole Bible; and respect the 'rule of faith' (the historical teaching of the Church). Augustine then offers methodological guidelines which sound like principles evangelical exegetes use today: be aware of how language works; compare translations, or learn Greek and Hebrew; make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge; compare difficult passages to clearer ones; consider the context; don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally; and pray for understanding. Although Augustine sounds like a conservative evangelical when he describes these principles, in his views on multiple meanings of biblical passages Augustine sounds more like a modern Pentecostal. He believes that a single passage of scripture may have more than one meaning, and that this is a gift from God. A biblical author may have realized that his writing could convey further possible meanings, or may not have foreseen all that God intended to communicate to later readers. However, Augustine does not promote unlimited interpretations of biblical texts. Any new 'spiritual' meaning discerned by the interpreter should be consistent with the author's intended meaning and the overall teaching of the Bible; should be in some way dependent on the literal-historical meaning of the passage; should not contradict the 'rule of faith'; and above all should promote love for God and for other people (Augustine's 'rule of love').

African theological students face an ongoing struggle connecting their academic study of the Bible with the spiritual vitality of today's African

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churches. African churches themselves are asking similar questions. "Why," church leaders wonder, "do our students come home from the theological college with so much information stuffed in their heads, but with so little ability to tell us what the Holy Spirit is really saying through the Bible today?" Or as one Zambian theological student put it, churches sometimes think their theology graduates return to them "academically equipped and half-baked spiritually"![1]

Theological colleges may bear some of the blame for a tendency to focus on academic issues rather than a contemporary spiritual encounter in teaching their students how God speaks through his written Word. At times God's historical act of divine communication is portrayed as far removed from the Holy Spirit's voice in today's world. Students and their teachers sometimes struggle to integrate the then-and-there and the here-and-now aspects of biblical revelation. On the other hand, some churches may not welcome the more informed biblical teaching that their theology graduates share with them, because it doesn't seem exciting or 'spiritual' enough. In fact, in some settings a spontaneous interpretation of a biblical passage is understood to be the 'spiritual' one, while a studied and thoughtful interpretation of the Bible is accused of limiting the Holy Spirit's work in some way. In this sense, the division between Word and Spirit lies partly on the churches' side.

However, it is unlikely that God intends for the written Word and the living Spirit to be separated. This tension between Word and Spirit in biblical interpretation is not something new to contemporary Africa, but is a challenge the Christian church has struggled with throughout the centuries. In fact, Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) wrote extensively about this tension in the fifth century A.D., approximately 1600 years ago. In this article we will explore Augustine's thoughts on 'academic' and 'spiritual' interpretations of the Bible, suggesting ways we can more accurately understand such interpretations and the relationship between them. The goal of this article is to help students of the Bible bring together the academic and spiritual dimensions of biblical interpretation.

I. Introduction

Augustine thought deeply about the Christian faith, and his many books and letters have had an immeasurable impact on generations of Christian writers and theologians. He developed ideas about the interpretation of scripture which continue to shape the approaches of evangelical biblical

scholars today.[2] He was born in 354 A.D., in what is now eastern Algeria. His mother, a Berber, was a Christian. As a young person Augustine studied rhetoric in Carthage (near modern day Tunis). Not yet a Christian himself, Augustine became a well known secular teacher of philosophy and rhetoric first in Carthage and then in Rome and Milan, major centers of the Roman Empire. He was then dramatically converted to Christianity in 386 A.D., under the influence of Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Augustine describes his spiritual journey and conversion in detail in his most famous work, his *Confessions*. In 388, Augustine returned to North Africa. He was ordained a priest in 391, and in 396 became Bishop of Hippo (now Annaba, Algeria), where he remained until he died in 430.[3]

Among Augustine's many writings and sermons, the focus of this article is *De Doctrina Christiana*, a title often translated from Augustine's Latin into English as *On Christian Doctrine*, but sometimes as *On Christian Teaching*. Augustine wrote the first three 'books' or chapters of *On Christian Doctrine* by 397, and then set it aside to work on the *Confessions* in 397-398. Many years later, around 426, he finished *On Christian Doctrine* by completing Book 3 and adding a fourth book dealing with homiletics. *On Christian Doctrine* is essentially a handbook of hermeneutics, laying out Augustine's ideas about how to interpret the Bible, and especially how to distinguish between literal and figurative passages in scripture.[4] More of Augustine's thinking on hermeneutics can be found in his other works, such as Books 12 and 13 of the *Confessions*, in commentaries such as *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (or, *Genesis according to the Word*), and in his many sermons. Near the end of his life Augustine wrote his *Retractationes*—meaning something like 'reconsiderations' rather than 'retractions'—in which he comments on his earlier books and offers further insights from a more mature perspective. While making some reference to the *Confessions* and other works, this article focuses on Augustine's guidelines for biblical interpretation in *On Christian Doctrine*. Most importantly, we will be looking at the connections Augustine makes between spiritual and human elements in the interpretation of scripture.

Augustine was very concerned that those who read the Bible learn to interpret it themselves, rather than depending solely on the insights of others. *On Christian Doctrine* begins:

> There are certain rules for interpreting the scriptures which, as I am well aware, can usefully be passed on to those with an appetite for such study to enable them to progress not just by reading the work of others who have illuminated the obscurities of divine literature, but also by finding illumination themselves.[5]

Augustine explains that teaching someone the rules of interpretation is like teaching them the alphabet: once they know these basics, they can read for themselves without needing someone else to read to them.[6]

In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine describes first what he believes are essential qualities of anyone who want to interpret the Bible. In his view, someone who seeks to interpret scripture should have a realistic appreciation for the way God blends spiritual and human elements in communicating his truth. The interpreter should also cultivate a humble, Christ-like character, sincerely desiring to know God. In addition, any interpreter of a passage of scripture needs a good working familiarity with the whole Bible, and an awareness of and respect for what the Church has believed through the centuries. Then, in terms of interpretive method, Augustine offers guidelines which sound very much like principles evangelical exegetes today would use in trying to determine the meaning of a biblical passage: be aware of the how language works; compare translations, and if possible, learn Greek and Hebrew; make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge; compare difficult or obscure passages to clearer ones; consider the context; don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally; and above all, pray for understanding.

However, throughout his guidelines for interpreting scripture, Augustine focuses on the 'rule of love.' For Augustine, someone reading the Bible may discover that a passage of scripture actually has more than one meaning intended by God and inspired by the Holy Spirit (but always consistent with the author's intended meaning, where that is clear). The most important thing in evaluating differing possible interpretations is to choose the one which most promotes love for God and for one's neighbor. In Augustine's view, this sums up the whole teaching of the Bible, and provides the best guide for the process of biblical interpretation.

In this article—intended as a non-exhaustive introduction to Augustine's hermeneutical thought—we will explore these aspects of Augustine's teaching, and suggest some implications for African theological students

struggling to bring together academic and spiritual elements in their own reading of the Bible.

II. Qualities of the Interpreter

The spiritual qualities Augustine lays out for the interpreter reflect his commitment to biblical interpretation as a spiritual exercise which incorporates important dimensions of human communication, but which should never be separated from a humble pursuit of God.

1. A realistic appreciation for the way God blends spiritual and human elements in communicating his truth

Augustine was very familiar with the charismatics of his day, and he knew that some people would argue that there is no need for guidelines for interpreting the Bible because they have a direct, Spirit-given understanding of scripture:

> A third class of critic consists of those who either interpret the divine scriptures quite correctly or think they do. Because they see, or at least believe, that they have gained their ability to expound the holy books without recourse to any rules of the kind that I have now undertaken to give, they will clamour that these rules are not needed by anybody, and that all worthwhile illumination of the difficulties of these texts can come by a special gift of God.[7]

In response, Augustine points out that these people should realize that even they make use of human elements in understanding scripture. In fact, the very alphabet that makes up the words they read in the Bible is a human invention, and they probably learned that alphabet as children from a human teacher,[8] just as they learned the language they speak from their parents or in other normal human ways.[9] Augustine asks somewhat sarcastically whether Christian parents should stop teaching their children to speak their language, and just wait for them to receive the gift of tongues from the Holy Spirit, as the disciples did at Pentecost![10] His point is that it has always been the case that God uses a mix of spiritual and human means to convey his message to his people. The divinely inspired words of scripture are written in common human language.

Augustine goes on to list biblical examples in which spiritual revelation and human learning are combined: Paul had a revelation from Christ on the

Damascus road, but received baptism and teaching from Ananias (Acts 9:3-8); an angel spoke to Cornelius and told him to ask Peter for further instruction (Acts 10:3-6); an angel sent Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch rather than interpreting the passage in Isaiah through divine revelation (Acts 8:26-35); Moses spoke directly with God but accepted spiritual advice from his father-in-law (Exodus 18).[11] For Augustine, in any of these incidents God could have chosen to do the entire work of communication through spiritual means, for example through angels or visions. But for whatever reason, God chose to include human communicators in the process. Augustine thinks God may do this to enhance the love human beings have for one another: "Moreover, there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans."[12]

Augustine's final challenge to those who think that God only reveals his truth through direct spiritual intervention is to ask them rather humorously why they bother to preach to others: "But if he reads and understands without any human expositor, why does he then aspire to expound it to others and not simply refer them to God so that they too may understand it by God's inner teaching rather than through a human intermediary?"[13] In Augustine's view, the very fact that those who feel they have received a direct revelation from God attempt to communicate it verbally to others undermines their claim that God only speaks 'spiritually' rather than also using normal human communication. For Augustine, the evidence shows that God's chosen method is to combine human and spiritual elements in communicating his truth.

2. A humble, Christ-like character, desiring to know God and his truth

In emphasizing the combination of spiritual and human means in divine revelation, Augustine repeatedly says that the person who wants to understand what a passage of scripture really means must have certain spiritual qualifications. The interpreter must be a humble Christian who truly desires to know God, rather than just wanting to know the Bible for its own sake: "So when someone has learnt that the aim of the commandment is 'love from a pure heart, and good conscience and genuine faith' [Tim. 1:5], he will be ready to relate every interpretation of the holy scriptures to these three things and may approach the task of handling these books with confidence."[14] Augustine explains that of these three qualities—love, good conscience, and faith—'love' must be 'from a pure heart', that is, loving

nothing but God and one's neighbor, rather than loving material things or other elements of this world. In Augustine's view a 'good conscience' is that of someone who knows the solid hope of being united with God through salvation. And 'genuine faith' is faith that is characterized by right living according to God's standards.[15]

For Augustine, the most important thing a student of scripture will learn from studying the Bible is "quite simply that he must love God for himself, and his neighbour for God's sake... [I]n other words, that his love of his neighbour, like his own self-love, should be totally related to God..."[16] Augustine points out that some students of the Bible miss this essential point. When such students argue about fine points of interpretation, like small differences in the translation or pronunciation of a single word, it shows that they are more concerned about being thought of as 'learned' or highly educated than they are about knowing God himself. In fact, too much knowledge of the 'signs' of scripture (that is, the words) rather than the 'things' the signs point to (that is, God), tempts the student of the Bible to become proud. Augustine warns that "a knowledge of things often makes people boastful, unless their necks are held down by the Lord's yoke."[17] This pursuit of academic knowledge for its own sake—or for the sake of the diploma or degree to which it leads—may contribute to the lack of spiritual vitality for which today's theology graduates are sometimes known in their churches.

Augustine makes the transition from the end of Book 2 of *On Christian Doctrine* to the beginning of Book 3 by summing up the way godly character puts the student in the best position to make use of analytical methods for interpreting scripture:

> The student who fears God earnestly seeks his will in the Holy Scriptures. Holiness makes him gentle, so that he does not revel in controversy; a knowledge of languages protects him from uncertainty over unfamiliar words or phrases, and a knowledge of certain essential things protects him from ignorance of the significance and detail of what is used by way of imagery.[18]

In Augustine's view, it is the student's love for God that drives him or her to understand scripture. A gentle spirit keeps him from becoming trapped in unnecessary controversies or complications in interpreting the Bible. An understanding of human language as the vehicle of God's

revelation helps her deal with unfamiliar words or phrases. And a fundamental knowledge of God's truth keeps a student from being carried away by overly imaginative interpretations. In short, a heart that longs to know God keeps the theological student on a solid path in interpreting the Bible.

3. A good working familiarity with the whole Bible

Because Augustine believes that the entire Bible points to a single overarching truth, specifically, the call to love God and other people with one's whole heart, he believes that even difficult passages of scripture can be understood with reference to this one great truth. For that reason, anyone who tries to interpret scripture should have a good general knowledge of the Bible and how its parts fit together. Augustine expects the interpreter to have read the scriptures—"not necessarily to understand them," he notes, "but to read them so as to commit them to memory or at least make them not totally unfamiliar"—and then to be able to compare more obscure passages with plainer ones.[19] As Augustine points out, this basic bible literacy helps the interpreter recognize good interpretations and guard against extreme or overly imaginative ones.[20]

Augustine says repeatedly that many difficult or obscure passages can be made sense of in light of the clearer ones. He claims, "It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the Holy Scripture so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones. Virtually nothing is unearthed from these obscurities which cannot be found quite plainly expressed somewhere else."[21] Today's theological students may or may not appreciate Augustine's suggestion that perhaps God allowed there to be obscure passages in the Bible in order to alleviate boredom and provide mental stimulation! But Augustine, the brilliant philosopher and theologian, was pleased to find in scripture both simple teaching and plenty of grain for his own intellectual mill. As he writes in the _Confessions_, "What wonderful profundity there is in your utterances! The surface meaning lies open before us and charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing."[22]

4. An awareness of and respect for what the Church has believed through the centuries

For Augustine, another spiritual requirement of the interpreter is to be firmly rooted in the church and its teaching as a safeguard against aberrant

interpretations of the Bible. Augustine speaks of this in terms of the 'rule of faith', which in his time was a concept referring to the church's collection of authoritative interpretations of scripture written by earlier Church Fathers, as well as the doctrinal creeds hammered out by church councils:

> Once close consideration has revealed that it is uncertain how a passage should be punctuated and articulated [that is, how the various clauses in a passage should be understood to relate to one another], we must consult the rule of faith, as it is perceived through the plainer passages of the scriptures and the authority of the church...[23]

Augustine gives the example of John 1:1-2. He notes that 'heretics' punctuate these phrases to mean 'the Word was with God, and there was God,' rather than following the authoritative church teaching which understands this verse to say 'the Word was God'—that is, asserting the deity of Christ: "This is to be refuted by the rule of faith, which lays down for us the equality of the members of the Trinity and so we should say 'and the Word was God', and then go on 'This was in the beginning with God.'"[24]

While many African evangelicals might be uncomfortable with Augustine's commitment to the authority of church tradition in interpreting the Bible (and taken to its extreme, rightly so), there is something to be gained from an awareness of the wisdom the Holy Spirit gave our spiritual ancestors which is often lacking in today's evangelicalism. As N.T. Wright observes, as contemporary interpreters we can benefit from the insights of the past without being slavishly bound to an extra-biblical authority:

> Paying attention to tradition means listening carefully (humbly but not uncritically) to how the church has read and lived scripture in the past. We must be constantly aware of our responsibility in the Communion of Saints, without giving our honored predecessors the final say or making them an 'alternative source,' independent of scripture itself. When they speak with one voice, we should listen very carefully. They may be wrong. They sometimes are. But we ignore them at our peril.[25]

Certainly Augustine's emphasis on church tradition reminds us that we are not the first to struggle with difficult passages of scripture and challenging theological issues. As men and women of the church have worked through these struggles over the centuries, they have sometimes

received great spiritual insight. Situating ourselves firmly in the community of faith, past and present, helps guard ourselves against strange new interpretations of scripture which might destructively lead us out of that community and away from its Savior. Too often today's preachers emphasize novelty or a 'fresh word from the Spirit' rather than recognizing that Jesus Christ who is "the same yesterday, today and tomorrow" (Heb. 13:8) speaks with a consistent voice.

III. Methodological 'Rules' for the Interpreter

In addition to his thoughts about the character of the interpreter, Augustine sets out basic 'rules' or guidelines for interpreting the Bible. These would not sound strange coming from any evangelical practicing a grammatical-historical approach to biblical interpretation today. Augustine wants interpreters to be aware of the ways language works, since divine revelation in scripture is given in the form of human words. He advises interpreters to compare translations to gain a clearer understanding of a passage, or better yet, to learn Greek and Hebrew if possible. Augustine urges students to make extensive, but selective, use of secular learning, especially science and history, to understand the biblical world. They must compare difficult or obscure passages with clearer ones, and should be always careful to consider the context in which a passage of scripture is found. Interpreters should be careful not to take literal passages figuratively or figurative passages literally. But Augustine also places continual emphasis on the need for humility and love in interpreting scripture. And ultimately, he contends that prayer is "absolutely vital" for understanding biblical truth.

1. Be aware of how human language works, communicating through 'signs' (words)

Augustine calls attention to the fact that the challenges we face understanding a passage of scripture are often rooted in the difficulty of using human language to communicate divine truths. Language is made up of 'signs' (words), Augustine explains. Those signs are not 'natural', they are 'given'—that is, words are arbitrary symbols which human beings speaking the same language agree to use to indicate certain things. As Froelich points out, "Augustine realized that language not only presents infinite opportunities for interaction but also comes with its own set of problems."[26] In fact, Augustine is considered one of the pioneers of

linguistic theory because of his ideas about how 'signs' work in human communication.

With reference to biblical interpretation Augustine writes, "There are two reasons why written texts fail to be understood: their meaning may be veiled either by unknown signs or by ambiguous signs."[27] 'Unknown' signs can often become known simply by learning more. Sometimes biblical signs (words) are unknown to us because we don't know Greek or Hebrew, or because we don't know enough about the author's world to understand what a word or phrase refers to. But as Augustine points out, other signs are 'ambiguous'. We may understand them at face value, but they may have more than one meaning or it may be difficult to tell whether they should be taken literally or figuratively. "[T]he student... should know that ambiguity in scripture resides either in literal or in metaphorical usages," Augustine explains.[28] Book 3 of *On Christian Doctrine* is all about making appropriate distinctions between literal and figurative passages of scripture. We will return to the issue of literal and figurative meanings below.

2. Compare translations; if possible, learn Greek and Hebrew

On the subject of unknown signs, Augustine stresses the importance of learning Greek and Hebrew if the student has opportunity.[29] Translations are helpful, but "[a]mbiguity in the original language often misleads a translator unfamiliar with the general sense of a passage, who may import a meaning which is quite unrelated to the writer's meaning."[30] Still, the student can compensate for this problem by checking more than one translation and comparing the different translators' understandings of the passage:

> Obscure passages are often clarified by the inspection of several manuscripts [that is, translations]... It is not clear which of these represents the truth unless the versions in the original language are consulted. Yet both convey something important to those who read intelligently. It is difficult to find translators who diverge so much that they do not touch at some point.[31]

However it is achieved—through comparing translations or by learning the original languages—the student of the Bible should seek out whatever information is available to make unknown signs better understood.

3. Make use of secular learning for background knowledge, but do so selectively

Another way to come to understand unknown signs is to make use of secular learning, especially history and science. Augustine is probably responsible for originating the famous image of 'plundering the Egyptians', which is still used today to describe exploiting secular resources for spiritual ends. He writes:

> Any statements by those who are called philosophers... which happen to be true and consistent with our faith should not cause alarm, but be claimed for our own use, as it were from owners who have no right to them. Like the treasures of the ancient Egyptians, who possessed not only idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel hated and shunned, but also vessels and ornaments of silver and gold, and clothes, which on leaving Egypt the people of Israel, in order to make better use of them, surreptitiously claimed for themselves... similarly all the branches of pagan learning contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies that involve unnecessary effort,... but also studies for liberated minds which are more appropriate to the service of the truth, and some very useful moral instruction, as well as the various truths about monotheism to be found in their writers. These treasures... must be removed by Christians... and applied to their true function, that of preaching the gospel.[32]

But Augustine warns students to be selective in how they make use of such material. Augustine is concerned that students who spend too much time pursuing secular study may become proud, and he warns that "they must ponder incessantly this phrase of the apostle Paul: 'knowledge puffs up, but love builds up' [I Cor. 8:1]." Developing the idea of 'plundering the Egyptians' into a beautiful image of spirituality, he reminds them that they must stay focused on Christ, so that "even if they leave Egypt well provided for, they realize that without first observing the Passover they cannot be saved. Now 'Christ our Passover has been sacrificed' [I Cor. 5:7]."[33]

No one should think they will find ultimate happiness in secular learning, Augustine advises, no doubt speaking from his own pre-conversion experience as a philosopher and rhetor. Instead, one should approach secular learning as a means to understand spiritual truth.[34] In this pursuit, he writes: "A person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs

to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities and deploring and avoiding those who 'though they knew God did not glorify him as God or give thanks...' [Rom. 1:21-3]"[35] In Augustine's view, while a knowledge of secular history and science can be an important help in understanding the 'signs' in scripture, the student should never confuse this knowledge with a knowledge of the 'thing' the signs point to—that is, God himself.

4. Check passages which are difficult to understand against clear overall biblical truth

Augustine believes that most passages of the Bible are fairly straightforward and can be understood in terms of the author's originally intended meaning. But he also recognizes that other passages are much more difficult to understand and interpret. Most of his advice in *On Christian Doctrine* is about how to deal with the more difficult passages. One of his basic interpretive principles is that "one should proceed to explore and analyse the obscure passages, by taking examples from the more obvious parts."[36] In making these comparisons a good basic knowledge of the whole Bible is an essential tool and "memory [of other biblical passages] is extremely valuable; and it cannot be supplied by these instructions if it is lacking."[37]

However, Augustine somewhat wryly points out that some people, when they discover that what they thought a passage of scripture meant actually contradicts other clearer passages, either decide they like their own interpretation better than the clear teaching of scripture elsewhere, or decide that the Bible itself must not be a reliable authority:

> It often happens that by thoughtlessly asserting something that the author did not mean an interpreter runs up against other things which cannot be reconciled with that original idea. If he agrees that these things are true and certain, his original interpretation could not possibly be true, and by cherishing his own idea he comes in some strange way to be more displeased with scripture than with himself.[38]

Augustine warns, "If he encourages this evil to spread it will be his downfall."[39] In all cases, the preacher must be controlled by the Bible, not the Bible by the preacher.

5.   Consider the context

Augustine gives the very practical advice that if more than one interpretation of a passage seems possible—and if the possible interpretations don't contradict the 'rule of faith'—the primary way to decide between them is to look at the context in which the verse is found:

> But if both interpretations, or indeed all of them, if there are several sides to the ambiguity, sound compatible with the faith, then it remains to consult the context—the preceding and following passages, which surround the ambiguity—in order to determine which of the several means that suggest themselves is supported by it, and which one lends itself to acceptable combinations with it.[40]

For example, in situations like Phil. 1:22-24 in which Paul's words "I do not know which I prefer; I am hard pressed between the two" can be understood more than one way (either as 'I desire both things,' or 'I desire one thing, but am obligated to do the other') and neither possibility contradicts the church's historical teaching, this ambiguous passage "has to be resolved by its actual context."[41]

6.   Don't take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally

The aspect of biblical interpretation which Augustine develops most fully in *On Christian Doctrine*—the aspect which he is most known for, and for which he is sometimes controversial today—is the issue of distinguishing between literal and metaphorical, or figurative, language in scripture. He explains that:

> Signs are called literal when used to signify the things for which they were invented: as, for example, when we say *bovem* [ox], meaning the animal which we and all speakers of Latin call by that name. They are metaphorical when the actual things which we signify by the particular words are used to signify something else: when, for example we say *bovem* and not only interpret these two syllables to mean the animal normally referred to by that name but also understand, by that animal, 'worker in the gospel', which is what scripture, as interpreted by the apostle Paul, means when it says, 'You shall not muzzle the ox that treads out the grain'.[42]

Augustine acknowledges that it can sometimes be difficult to know whether a biblical author has meant for something to be taken literally, or to be taken figuratively as pointing to something else. Nevertheless, it is very important to make this distinction. He warns, "As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if it were literal, we must add another rule: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative."[43]

But the challenge lies in recognizing which expressions should be taken literally and which expressions should be taken figuratively. Augustine devotes Book 3 of *On Christian Doctrine* to giving guidelines for making these distinctions. He explains his overarching principle: "Generally, speaking, it is this: anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbour, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbour."[44] For example, where scripture says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink" (Rom. 12:20), Augustine affirms that "no one can doubt that it enjoins kindness. But one would think that the following words, 'for by doing this you will pile coals of fire on his head', advocate malicious wrongdoing; so one can be sure that it was meant figuratively."[45] This goes back to Augustine's view that the teaching of the whole Bible points us toward loving God, and toward loving other people for God's sake. However, although the distinction between what is literal and what is figurative is an essential one, not all cases are as straightforward as this example. And unfortunately, Augustine's statements in this section do not make the matter entirely clear for today's students. Because of the many questions raised in this section but not answered, R.P.H. Green notes, "Later writers in general found this the least rewarding of the four books" of *On Christian Doctrine*.[46]

One question is what exactly Augustine means by 'figurative', especially in historical passages. Does he mean that the historical events themselves didn't actually take place, or rather that their significance lies in some spiritual truth beyond the historical details? For Augustine it is the latter. While such passages may deal with real historical incidents, these passages should be seen as pointing to something beyond what they speak directly about. Augustine is concerned that interpreters do not get so distracted by the surface details of a difficult or obscure passage that they miss the spiritual significance by which the passage points to God himself.

Augustine gives the following example of the words 'sabbath' and 'sacrifice':

> A person who follows the letter understands metaphorical words as literal, and does not relate what the literal word signifies to any other meaning. On hearing the word 'sabbath', for example, he interprets it simply as one of the seven days which repeat themselves in a continuous cycle; and on hearing the word 'sacrifice' his thoughts do not pass beyond the rituals performed with sacrificial beasts or fruits of the earth. It is, then, a miserable kind of spiritual slavery to interpret signs as things, and to be incapable of raising the mind's eye above the physical creation so as to absorb the eternal light.[47]

In other words, items like 'sabbath' and 'sacrifice' should not be taken as ends in themselves (although they do refer to real things), but should be understood as pointing us to important truths about God, his holy character, and his plans for human redemption. Augustine goes on to say that the Israelites fell into this sort of legalistic spiritual bondage and missed the overarching truth by mistaking the 'signs' of their forms of temple worship for the spiritual realities of the 'things' those signs represented. In fact, at many points Augustine takes a typological approach to the Old Testament, emphasizing how Old Testament events and persons prefigure Christ. "So all," he writes, "or nearly all, of the deeds contained in the books of the Old Testament are to be interpreted not only literally but also figuratively."[48]

Augustine makes several side points in his discussion about discerning literal from figurative passages of scripture. Those working in multi-cultural situations in Africa may be interested to know that Augustine was very aware of cultural bias in biblical interpretation. He warns again interpreting a passage as figurative rather than literal merely to avoid critiquing the practices of one's own culture:

> But since the human race is prone to judge sins... by the standard of its own practices, people generally regard as culpable only such actions as men of their own time and place tend to blame and condemn, and regard as commendable and praiseworthy only such actions as are acceptable within the conventions of their own society. And so it happens that if scripture enjoins something at variance with the practices of its readers, or censures something that is not at

variance with them, they consider the relevant expression to be figurative...[49]

He also writes that in interpreting the Bible, "We must therefore pay careful attention to the conduct appropriate to different places, times, and persons, in case we make rash imputations of wickedness."[50] He gives the example of polygamy, which he believes was acceptable in the circumstances of Old Testament times, but would not be acceptable in his own cultural context.

Augustine also includes some cautions about the nature of figurative language. He reminds students of the Bible that there are various types of figures of speech, allegory, irony, and so forth included in biblical literature, and that students should realize that these function in the Bible in much the same variety of ways they do in everyday speech.[51] Likewise, just because a word is used to symbolize one thing in one part of the Bible does not mean that it is used with the same sense in every biblical passage. He gives the example of yeast, which Jesus used in a negative sense about the Pharisees in Matt. 16:6, 11, and in a positive sense about the kingdom of God in Luke 13:21.[52]

These caveats make it clear that Augustine's guidelines for interpreting the Bible are just that—guidelines and general principles, rather than fixed rules for every instance. Students may wonder just how to apply these guidelines, and in what circumstances to apply which one. But as he does at so many points in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine emphasizes again the role of the interpreter's Christian character in promoting the understanding of scripture, especially in interpreting the more difficult passages with figurative meanings: "When we have worked out that it is figurative, it is easy to study it from various angles... until we reach the true meaning, especially if we have the advantage of experience fortified by the exercise of holiness."[53] The holiness of the interpreter, that is, the interpreter's wholehearted love for God, leads the interpreter toward biblical truth.

7. Above all, pray!

Along these lines, prayer is Augustine's final word of advice for those who want to know what the Bible means:

> [S]tudents of our revered scriptures must be taught to recognize the various kinds of expressions in holy scripture, to notice and memorize the ways in which it tends to say things, and especially—this is

paramount, and absolutely vital—to pray for understanding. In the literature which they study they read that 'God gives wisdom, and from his face there is knowledge and understanding' [Prov. 2:6], and it is from him too that they have received even their commitment to study, provided that it is accompanied by holiness.[54]

In his *Confessions*, Augustine himself prays, "May your scriptures be my pure delight, so that I am not deceived in them and do not lead others astray in interpreting them... O Lord, bring me to perfection and reveal to me the meaning of these pages."[55]

On the one hand, students must be taught how scripture 'works' so that they can read it knowledgeably. On the other hand, it is "paramount" and "absolutely vital" that one continually pray for spiritual understanding, and in fact personal transformation, in order to interpret scripture. It is in this way that both study and holiness come together for the student of the Bible—and each comes from God. As Francis Watson observes regarding the human and spiritual dimensions of Augustine's hermeneutical rules, "Augustine at no point suggests that these items are in competition with one another." Watson explains:

> For example, he does not argue that an expertise in textual criticism, while all very well in its way, pales into insignificance in comparison with the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom. He does not suggest that secular or technical aspects of biblical interpretation may safely be overlooked by those who see (and rightly so!) only the text's spiritual sense... Augustine everywhere assumes that texts embody an author's communication intentions and that it is the task of interpretation to clarify these. [56]

However, Watson also points out that in Augustine's view, trying to determine a biblical author's intention "in no way inhibits the semantic abundance intended and disclosed by the Holy Spirit, beyond what was consciously intended by the human author."[57] It is Augustine's understanding of this 'semantic abundance,' the idea that a biblical passage can have more than one meaning, to which we now turn.

IV. Multiple Meanings in Scripture

Augustine may sound like a conservative evangelical when he describes the 'rules' of biblical interpretation, but when it comes to his views on

multiple meanings of a biblical passage he begins to sound more like a modern Pentecostal. At the least, Augustine's insights regarding multiple meanings in scripture may be helpful to African theological students who find that many people in their churches assume that biblical passages have more than one meaning, but who also find that this topic is not fully dealt with in their theological studies.

1. Can God intend a passage of the Bible to have more than one meaning?

In what may be the most controversial aspect of his approach to interpreting the Bible, Augustine has no problem with the idea that a single passage of scripture may have multiple meanings, even beyond what the original author knowingly communicated. In fact, he suggests that this multiplicity of meanings may have been planned and implemented by the Holy Spirit as a "generous and bountiful gift from God" for our benefit:

> Perhaps the author too saw that very meaning in the words which we are trying to understand. Certainly the spirit of God who worked through the author foresaw without any doubt that it would present itself to a reader or listener, or rather planned that it should present itself, because it too is based on the truth. Could God have built into the divine eloquence a more generous or bountiful gift that the possibility of understanding the same words in several ways, all of them deriving confirmation from other no less divinely inspired passages?[58]

What did these multiple meanings look like for Augustine? In his own exegesis, Augustine often took a highly allegorical approach, interpreting individual elements in a biblical text as symbols for other spiritual truths. Augustine's treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan in his *Questions on the Gospels*, in which he sees the beaten man as representing Adam and the Samaritan as Christ, is justly infamous. However, it must be remembered that Augustine was still in some sense a child of his times, and that this was the nearly universal understanding of this parable among patristic writers.[59] In *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine first offers a more straightforward ethical interpretation of the parable in which he affirms that "it is clear that we should understand by our neighbour the person to whom an act of compassion is due if he needs it."[60] Then just a few paragraphs later he expresses the more allegorical view that it is Christ, as the Samaritan, who gives spiritual help to those "who lay half-dead on the road"

and that in this "God shows compassion on us because of his own kindness, and we in turn show it to one another because of his kindness."[61]

For Augustine, all these meanings of the parable can coexist, because they all speak of one biblical truth. As Mike Higton explains:

> How can a theological reader, [Augustine] might say, take this lesson about love and isolate it from the broader theological context?... In speaking of love, this parable speaks (as its context suggests) of the one true content of the law; the one true subject matter of theology; it speaks of the self-same subject matter which is spoken of in every other theological locus... Once that fundamental unity of the subject matter of the gospel is admitted, it must be an act of extraordinary and artificial restraint not to see Christ in the figure of the Good Samaritan...[62]

However, Higton expresses concern that Augustine sometimes goes too far in abstracting and spiritualizing such passages of scripture, to the extent that biblical teaching about Jesus' humanity and our own material 'creaturely-ness' is undervalued, and that difficult and provocative passages of scripture are artificially smoothed over. In my view, the ahistorical quality of most allegory tends to undermine the central proclamation of the gospel: that Jesus Christ entered human history in time and space, died for our sins, and rose to live again. Yet as Higton suggests, "Augustine's allegorical exegesis teaches us to be bold and daring in our appropriation of the gospel: to hunt out connections and meanings at constant risk of trespassing beyond sober scholarships bounds."[63] Evangelical theological students may rightly find themselves uncomfortable with the extent of Augustine's allegorizing. But Augustine does remind us that each truth in scripture is connected to other truths in scripture, and all of them to the one great truth of the gospel—whatever interpretive strategy we may choose to adopt.

Thus, in spite of his tendency toward allegory, Augustine does not promote unlimited or erratic interpretations of biblical texts. The first test for an interpretation of a passage, even (and perhaps especially) if more than one meaning is assumed to be latent in it, is to make sure that any proposed meaning is consistent with the broad teaching of the Bible as it is expressed in other, clearer passages. He affirms, "Sometimes not just one meaning but two or more meanings are perceived in the same words of scripture. Even if

the writer's meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth."[64] This broad knowledge of the Bible keeps the student from falling into 'danger', to use Augustine's term. Even if the student gets a particular passage wrong, he or she will not wander far off from the Holy Sprit's essential message.

In Augustine's own view, his allegorical interpretations are closely tied to the literal meaning of a passage. [65] For example, he asserts that it is a "well-known fact" that a snake "offers his whole body to assailants in place of his head." This is the basis on which Augustine interprets Jesus' teaching that his followers should be 'wise as serpents' (Matt. 10:16) to mean that "in place of our head, which is Christ [Eph. 4:15], we should offer our body to persecutors, so that the Christian faith is not as it were killed within us when we spare our body and deny God."[66] In his extended commentary on Genesis 1 in Books 12 and 13 of the *Confessions*, Augustine does not turn to allegory until he has made an exhaustive attempt to deal with potential literal meanings of the passage. [67] Bertrand de Margerie observes, "Augustine clearly rules out a single literal meaning which would exclude any other compatible interpretations *dependent in some way on the literal sense*" (my emphasis).[68] Whether or not a student chooses to follow Augustine's allegorizing path in his or her own interpretation of scripture, Augustine would urge that the student start with as complete an understanding as possible of the literal-historical sense of a passage before seeking whatever additional meanings the Holy Spirit may suggest in the text.

Along similar lines, Augustine notes that the student is on safer ground when a fresh 'spiritual' meaning he or she suggests is clearly consistent with (but not necessarily identical to) the intention of the author of the passage, at least to the extent the author's intention can be perceived. Although there may be a number of possible interpretations of a passage—of which the biblical author may or may not have been aware—the author's originally intended meaning is the 'superior' one. As Augustine explains in the *Confessions* concerning various interpretations of the creation story in Genesis,

> surely whatever you were intending to reveal to later readers by those words could not be hidden from 'your good Spirit who will lead me into the right land' [Ps. 142: 10]. This must be true, even if it were the

case that Moses, through whom this was said, had in mind perhaps only one of the many true interpretations. If this was so, we may allow that the meaning which he had in his mind was superior to all others.[69]

Augustine continues, "Lord, we beg you to show us either what that one meaning is or some other true meaning of your choice. Make clear to us either the understanding possessed by your servant or some other meaning suggested by the same text, that we may feed on you and not be led astray by error."[70]

In addition, any 'new' meaning is more likely to be a true one if it lies within the parameters of the church's teaching through the ages—that is, if it is consistent with the 'rule of faith':

> The person examining the divine utterances must of course do his best to arrive at the intention of the writer through whom the Holy Spirit produced that part of scripture; he may reach that meaning or carve out from the words another meaning which does not run counter to the faith, using the evidence of any other passage of the divine utterance.[71]

If there is no obvious parallel passage to point to, but the student still feels that there is a spiritual meaning which can be found in the passage even if it may not be quite the one the author intended, he or she can appeal to reason to argue for the validity of the proposed new meaning. But Augustine warns that "this practice is dangerous" and that "it is much safer to operate within the divine scriptures":

> When one unearths an equivocal meaning which cannot be ratified by unequivocal support from the holy scriptures it remains for the meaning to be brought into the open by a process of reasoning, even if the writer whose words we are seeking to understand perhaps did not perceive it. But this practice is dangerous; it is much safer to operate within the divine scriptures. When we wish to examine passages made obscure by metaphorical expressions, the result should be something which is beyond dispute or which, if not beyond dispute, can be settled by finding and deploying corroboratory evidence from within scripture itself.[72]

In essence, Augustine is arguing that the Bible, with its various books and human authors, will always be consistent with itself because of the divine authorship of God.[73] This has been called Augustine's 'canonical' approach to hermeneutics. This parameter for legitimate interpretation is one reason why a general knowledge of the Bible is essential for the student. Certainly, in Augustine's view, the Holy Spirit may lead a reader to see a meaning for a particular biblical passage that goes beyond the meaning its original author envisioned. As noted above, Augustine suggests that this is God's "generous gift" to his human creatures. But any such meanings, if they are indeed legitimate promptings of the Spirit, will "deriv[e] confirmation from other no less divinely inspired passages."[74]

Above all, for Augustine, the Holy Spirit will always guide the student into a deeper understanding of and commitment to love for God and one's neighbor. This 'rule of love' forms Augustine's unifying hermeneutical principle.

2.   Augustine's overarching hermeneutical principle: The 'rule of love'

Augustine states what in his understanding is "the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures":

> The chief purpose of all that we have been saying in our discussion of 'things' is to make it understood that the fulfillment and end of the law and all the divine scriptures is to love the thing which must be enjoyed [that is, God] and the thing which together with us can enjoy that thing [that is, other people]...[75]

This 'fulfillment and end' of biblical revelation is the love of God, and correspondingly, of other people—that is, the Greatest Commandment taught by Jesus (Matt. 22:36-40). This is what Augustine refers to as the hermeneutical 'rule of love'.

Kevin Vanhoozer points out that Augustine's hermeneutical rule is not the same as the attempt by some modern biblical scholars to interpret the Bible in terms of the overarching principle that 'God is love,' that is, that a 'loving' God generously permits and overlooks all human behaviors. Vanhoozer notes that "'love' is not the only model for how God relates to the world." [76] There is also much in the Bible concerning holiness and judgment, and the quality of life expected of God's people. Augustine is talking about the believer's obedient love for God, not 'God's love' as

license for any behavior. As Vanhoozer observes, in Augustinian terms, "'Correct' interpretation of Scripture means living a life of love and service to God, to the church as the people of God, and to the world."[77]

Augustine goes on to make his point negatively as well, asserting that anyone who thinks they have understood a biblical passage, but who has not had their love of God and other people increased by their reading of it, does not really understand scripture at all:

> So anyone who thinks that he has understood the divine scriptures or any part of them, but cannot by his understanding build up this double love of God and neighbour, has not yet succeeded in understanding them. Anyone who derives from them an idea which is useful for supporting this love but fails to say what the writer demonstrably meant in the page has not made a fatal error, and is certainly not a liar.[78]

In fact, Augustine says above, even a *mis*understanding of a particular biblical passage, if it leads in practice to a greater love for God and neighbor is not a 'fatal error.'

3. What about mistaken interpretations?

This leads to the question of misinterpretation, the danger of misunderstanding the Bible because one is seeking new or fresh or multiple contemporary meanings from a given passage. Many evangelicals fear that affirming a more subjective, that is, Spirit-led experience of reading scripture will inevitably lead not just to interpretational anarchy, but to actual heresy. Others point to examples of untaught church leaders who engage in many years of (possibly quite fruitful) ministry based on a limited and often inaccurate understanding of the scriptures they preach, producing churches full of men and women who perpetuate biblical error. Along these same lines, it is not uncommon for theological students who have taken a few courses in biblical studies and hermeneutics to look back with amazement or even shame at the 'mistakes' they themselves have made in previous years of preaching and teaching.

But Augustine does not seem to be unduly troubled by this problem, provided that the interpreter is genuinely committed to the core message of the Bible, the love of God and neighbor, rather than to self-interest. He acknowledges that it is possible to misinterpret scripture—that is, that some

interpretations of particular passages are genuinely wrong—but that a humble orientation toward the love of God and others will keep the interpreter moving in generally the right direction. To illustrate this he uses the very practical image of someone walking on a path through a field:

> Anyone with an interpretation of the scriptures that differs from that of the writer is misled, but not because the scriptures are lying. If, as I began by saying, he is misled by an idea of the kind that builds up love, which is the end of the commandment, he is misled in the same way as a walker who leaves his path by mistake but reaches the destination to which the path leads by going through a field. But he must be put right and shown how it is more useful not to leave the path, in case the habit of deviating should force him to go astray or even adrift.[79]

The path in this image represents biblical truth. The walker is the interpreter, who for the most part stays to the path. But sometimes by mistake (that is, a mistaken interpretation of a biblical passage), the walker leaves the path and finds himself wandering in a field. However, he keeps going in the same direction (toward the love of God and neighbor), and eventually reaches the destination to which the path was heading. Therefore, no real harm is done. However, as Augustine points out, one would not want to make a habit of doing this intentionally. It is more productive and useful to keep on the path. And unfortunately it is possible, if one makes a habit of straying off the path of well-reasoned biblical interpretation, to find oneself permanently lost.

This image conveys a great deal of grace for those who have little theological training but whose attitude of humble love for God and neighbor guides their reading of scripture. It offers a picture of how even errors in the interpretation of the Bible may sometimes lead to a biblical goal. But at the same time it warns us of the danger of intentionally leaving the path of sound biblical interpretation, it urges us to learn how to keep to that path, and it defines for us the destination toward which that path is going.

The essential element is the interpreter's heart attitude toward God. One gets the impression that Augustine might have a good deal of appreciation for the rural African pastor with a passionate love for God and for others, who teaches the congregation what little he or she knows of biblical truth, even if some of that teaching is less than accurate. Such preachers can and should be taught better methods of biblical interpretation as the occasion

allows, but there is no shame in the attempt to express their love for God through their own reading of scripture. However, Augustine might have much less sympathy for the modern African 'prophet'—even one with a theological degree—who leads his or her congregation into misinterpretations of scripture born out of mutual self-interest or a drive for material gain, no matter how 'spiritual' that drive is portrayed to be.

V. Conclusion

Augustine never forgets the purpose of biblical interpretation; he never confuses the 'signs' for the 'things', the means for the ends. In terms of an interpretive method, Augustine offers a clear view of the way God combines spiritual and human elements in biblical revelation. An understanding of the human language in which that revelation is recorded (the 'signs' found in the Bible), and true spiritual humility resulting in a passionate love for God (the 'thing' to which the Bible points) are each essential elements. 'Signs' may need careful study to decipher, especially if they are unknown or ambiguous. But these 'signs' are only a means to reach a fuller knowledge of the 'things' about which the Bible teaches.

In sum, Augustine urges students of scripture to develop a good overall knowledge of the Bible, and to have a healthy respect for the church's teaching through the ages. He believes interpreters should be aware of how human language works. They should learn the original biblical languages or carefully compare translations. They should make selective use of secular learning for background knowledge. They should test interpretations of difficult passages against clear overall biblical truth. They should consider the context in which a biblical passage is found. They should be careful not to take literal things figuratively or figurative things literally. And it is 'absolutely vital' that they pray for enlightenment.

If it sounds to the modern African evangelical as though Augustine embodies a 'western' historical-grammatical approach to scripture, it should be clearly recognized that the influence flows in the opposite direction: Augustine, the half-Berber from North Africa, was the architect of western evangelical hermeneutics. And while it may be argued that he was the recipient of a 'western' education (that of the Latin-speaking Roman Empire), it was Augustine's own genius, as well as his pastoral concern for the churches in North Africa of which he was bishop, that produced his unique and lasting contribution to biblical interpretation.

Moreover, as we have seen, there are elements of Augustine's hermeneutics concerning the role of the Spirit in biblical interpretation which have been overlooked by many western conservative evangelicals, but which may offer insights particularly relevant to African churches today. If a passage of scripture appears to have more than one possible meaning inspired by the Holy Spirit (and Augustine believes this is quite possible and even beneficial, especially in obscure passages which are difficult to understand more straightforwardly), the student should choose the meaning which is most likely to produce love for God and for other people, rather than promoting self-interest or a drive for material gain. While acknowledging church tradition and the overall teaching of the Bible, in Augustine's view this 'rule of love' provides the best overarching guide in the process of seeking to understand scripture, and serves as a safeguard against straying too far from the path of sound biblical interpretation.

Augustine's integration of human and spiritual elements in understanding biblical truth goes a long way toward addressing the challenges of theological students who sometimes find themselves mired in academic abstractions, and at the same time of churches who may find themselves overlooking what biblical authors desired to communicate in favor of new and exciting 'spiritual' interpretations. African theological students who struggle to connect their academic study of the Bible with the spiritual vitality they long for may find they have much to learn from Augustine.[80]

End Notes

¹ Student questionnaire response, Theological College of Central Africa (Ndola, Zambia). I am grateful to the many students at the Ethiopian Graduate School of Theology and other colleges who have shared their thoughts and concerns about how theological colleges could teach biblical interpretation in ways more relevant to contemporary African contexts. Others who would like to share their perspectives on this topic are invited to contact the author at hermeneuticsforafrica@gmail.com.

² "Augustine is the first orthodox Christian in the West to advance a comprehensive and original hermeneutic. [The Jewish exegete] Philo and Origen are his predecessors in the East, Ambrose and Ticonius in the West. Ambrose is orthodox, but not original; Ticonius is original, but not orthodox. Augustine's contemporary Jerome spent the better part of his life on translation and exegesis of Scripture" (Frederick Van Fleteren, 'Principles of Augustine's Hermeneutic: An Overview,' in Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (eds.), *Augustine: Biblical Exegete* [New York: Peter Lang, 2001], p. 1).

³ For the standard scholarly account of Augustine's life, see Peter Brown, *Augustine: A Biography, Revised Edition with a New Epilogue* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

⁴ Scholars have debated whom Augustine had in mind as the target audience for *On Christian Doctrine*. As Van Fleteren explains, "According to one contemporary opinion, Augustine sent a copy of *De doctrina christiana* to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, as a kind of textbook for clerical students. Other commentators, looking to the preface, fancy the work as an apologetic against local charismatics who saw no need for scientific exegesis" (Van Fleteren, 'Principles,' p. 11).

⁵ *On Christian Doctrine,* preface (1) [1]. All quotations from *On Christian Doctrine* are taken from Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R.P.H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). The initial book, chapter and paragraph numbers in each reference, e.g. 1.1 (1), are those traditionally used. Additional paragraph numbers in square brackets are those of a different historical system adopted by Green in this edition.

⁶ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (9) [18].

⁷ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (2) [4].

⁸ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (4) [7].

⁹ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (5) [9-11].

¹⁰ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (5) [9-11].

¹¹ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (6-7) [12-15].

¹² *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (6) [13].

¹³ *On Chr. Doct.,* preface (8) [16].

¹⁴ *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.40 (44) [95].

¹⁵ *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.40 (44) [95].

¹⁶ *On Chr. Doct.,* 2.7 (10) [18-20].

¹⁷ *On Chr. Doct.,* 2.13 (20) [46].

[18] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.1 (1) [1].

[19] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [30].

[20] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.8 (12) [24].

[21] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.6 (8) [15].

[22] *Confessions*, 12.14 (18). Augustine also suggested that difficult passages in scripture may exist to counteract pride: "In some passages [casual readers] find no meaning at all that they can grasp at, even falsely, so thick is the fog created by some obscure phrases. I have no doubt that this is all divinely predetermined, so that pride may be subdued by hard work and intellects which tend to despise things that are easily discovered may be rescued from boredom and reinvigorated" (*On Chr. Doct.* 2.6 (7) [10]).

All quotations from the *Confessions* are taken from Saint Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Henry Chadwick; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Book, chapter and paragraph numbers in each reference are those traditionally used, as incorporated by Chadwick in this edition.

[23] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (2) [3].

[24] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (3) [5]. As a counterexample of a contested passage which does not deny the rule of faith, he offers Phil. 1:22-24, in which Paul's words "I do not know which I prefer; I am hard pressed between the two" could either have the sense of 'I desire both things' or 'I desire one thing, but am obligated to do the other.' Augustine points out that this ambiguous passage "is not, on either interpretation, at odds with the faith, and therefore has to be resolved by its actual context" (*On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (4) [6]).

[25] N.T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), p. 117.

[26] Karlfried Froehlich, '"Take Up and Read": Basics of Augustine's Biblical Interpretation,' *Interpretation* 58:1 (Jan 2004), p. 13.

[27] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.10 (15) [32].

[28] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.1 (1) [2].

[29] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.11 (16) [34].

[30] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.12 (18) [41].

[31] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.12 (17) [37,39].

[32] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.40 (60) [144-145].

[33] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.41 (62) [148].

[34] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.39 (58) [139].

[35] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.18 (28) [72-73].

[36] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [31].

[37] *On Chr. Doct.*, 2.9 (14) [31].

[38] *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.37 (41) [89].

[39] *On Chr. Doct.*, 1.37 (41) [89].

[40] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (2) [3].

[41] *On Chr. Doct.*, 3.2 (4) [5-6].

[42] *On Chr. Doct.,* 2.10 (15) [32-33].

[43] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.10 (14) [33].

[44] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.10 (14) [33-34].

[45] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.16 (24) [56].

[46] R.P.H. Green, 'Introduction,' in Saint Augustine, *On Christian Teaching* (trans. R.P.H. Green; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. xvi.

[47] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.5 (9) [21].

[48] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.22 (32) [73].

[49] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.10 (15) [35].

[50] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.12 (19) [45].

[51] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.29 (40) [87].

[52] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.25 (35) [78].

[53] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.24 (34) 76].

[54] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.37 (56) [134].

[55] *Conf.* 11.2 (3).

[56] Francis Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,' in A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), p. 123.

[57] Watson, 'Authors, Readers, Hermeneutics,' p. 123.

[58] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.27 (38) [85].

[59] See Mike Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve: A Lesson from St. Augustine,' *Anglican Theological Review* Summer 2003, available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3818/is_200307/ai_n9265336. See also Riemer Roukema, 'The Good Samaritan in Ancient Christianity,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 58:1 (Jan 2004), pp. 56-97. To my knowledge, Augustine's *Questions on the Gospels* (*Quaestiones Evangeliorum*) is not available in English translation.

[60] *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.30 (31) [68].

[61] *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.30 (33) [71].

[62] Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve.'

[63] Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve.' At the same time, Higton warns, we need "to practice this boldness with a certain humility and reserve... ready always to have the irritating grit of the texts we are trying to read interrupt our smooth constructions" (Higton, 'Boldness and Reserve').

[64] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.27 (38) [84].

[65] As Vanhoozer points out, "Augustine advocates a thorough analysis of the literal sense as a control on arbitrary reading. As such, Augustine represents a synthesis of the Alexandrian and Antiochene approaches" (Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998], p. 118).

[66] *On Chr. Doct.,* 2.16 (24) [59].

[67] It should be noted, however, that later in his life, for example in his commentary on Genesis and in the *Retractationes*, Augustine increasingly took a more literal-historical approach to interpreting the Old Testament. Or rather, we

might say that as previously unknown signs became more known and familiar to him, he found more spiritual significance in the literal-historical dimensions of such passages. Froelich observes, "Only in his last commentary, *On Genesis According to the Letter*... did Augustine dare to interpret the first three chapters of Genesis 'not in terms of their allegorical signification but in terms of the events themselves' (*Retract.* 2.24.[50])" (Froelich, 'Basics,' p. 6).

[68] Bertrand de Margerie, *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis. III. Saint Augustine* (trans. Pierre de Fontnouvelle; Petersham, MA: Saint Bede's, 1991), p. 53. In Chapter II of this work, 'Does Augustine's Moses Stand for Multiplicity in Unity?,' de Margerie offers an extended treatment of Augustine's views on multiple meanings in scripture.

[69] *Conf.* 12.32 (43).

[70] *Conf.* 12.32 (43).

[71] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.27 (38) [84].

[72] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.28 (39) [86].

[73] De Margerie writes, "In short, it is as though, in Augustine's view, the interpretation of a specific and difficult text were to assume the converging and unified mediation of a supreme Author, of Providence unifying texts, meanings, and minds of all inspired authors..., of all readers who are also believers, to whom and through whom the inspiring Spirit continues to reveal the multiple but congruent meanings of the text involved, provided they do not clash with the main sense which the human author had in mind" (de Margerie, *Saint Augustine*, p. 55).

[74] *On Chr. Doct.,* 3.27 (38) [85].

[75] *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.35 (39) [84].

[76] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 86.

[77] Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, p. 333.

[78] *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.36 (40) [86].

[79] *On Chr. Doct.,* 1.36 (41) [88].

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THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ACTS 17:24-28 FOR RESOLVING TRIBAL CONFLICTS: A CASE STUDY OF MOLO CONSTITUENCY, KENYA

Moses Njenga Ng'ang'a

Introduction

Kenya has experienced increased tribal animosity often leading to violent clashes between ethnic groups since 1990, Molo constituency in Nakuru district could easily be among the worst hit areas by this violence. This violence has caused wanton destruction of property, enormous loss of lives, leaving a great number of families homeless. The political and provincial administrative leaders have responded to these clashes by separation of the tribes and resettlement of the displaced victims in new land away from aggressors, usually as squatters. This approach not only fuels new violence but nurtures the desire for revenge albeit to recover the land lost in such circumstances. In this article we seek to establish the Biblical foundations for ethnic coexistence as seen in Acts 17:24-28; thereby attempting to build a theology of ethnic coexistence, before arriving at implications that this theology portends for the Church in Molo constituency of Nakuru district. The result of this work is expected to benefit not only the Church but also stakeholders involved in the process of healing and reconciliation of tribes.

The Background of the Problem

Factors that Promote Negative Ethnicity

Human beings are supposed to view themselves as a unit, especially when they occupy the same country and have a lot in common. This however is not always the case, people always result to such things as cultural and ethnic differences in order to exclude others and advance themselves and their own ethnic causes[1]. Such reasons are at the root of

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the rivalry that has been seen in Molo constituency since the early 1990s. This ethnic hatred dates as far back to the pre-colonial and colonial Kenya and as such is definitely beyond the scope of our work, however, it is necessary to give a background of factors that promote negative ethnicity in Kenya.

It is the argument of John Lonsdale that negative ethnicity in Kenya is a product of five intrinsic trends which are part of the culture. First, he identifies political ethnicity as prominent and the most obvious form of ethnicity in Kenya today. He explains that political ethnicity is viewed as the propagation of hateful statement against another's ethnic group with a view to make that person appear bad to others, this is mostly done by leaders in order to secure their position by amalgamating their tribesmen to their side. The second is economic ethnicity based on the way different communities in the country share resources. Most violence is traced back to watering holes, pasture-land and other natural resources. Third, is moral ethnicity in which a person seeking to differentiate himself from the others sends negative messages to members of the other ethnic groups, which are interpreted as discriminative. Fourth, is the cultural ethnicity in which the ethnic passages in life become the defining factor of whom a person is rather than their other achievements causing discrimination in many spheres of life. The last factor of negative ethnicity is industrial; in which a popular view may be that only a certain ethnic group can be able to deal with certain jobs. This again breeds discrimination against others who though good in those jobs may not get the opportunities just because their ethnic group is not known for that kind of a job.[2]

These five trends given by Lonsdale are true especially when one considers the Molo ethnic clashes. It is also note worthy that though there may be no violence in other places in the country the same kind of negative ethnicity persists. We will therefore try to address them as the key reasons of negative ethnicity and the genesis of ethnic clashes in Molo constituency among other places in Kenya

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[1] Edward Sapir, "Language, Race and Culture." In *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader.* Edited by Roxy Harris & Ben Rampton. (London: Routledge, 2003), 28-29.

[2] John Lonsdale "The Dynamics of Ethnic Developments in Africa: Moral & Political Argument in Kenya." In *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa.* Edited by Bruce Berman et al. (Oxford: James Currey, 2004), 75-81

The Missing Ingredient

There is no doubt that there is something missing; something that would make the diverse ethnic groups in Kenya to unite in the interest of the nation. Atieno Odhiambo gives a typical example of how the problem of ethnicity is viewed and tackled in Kenya throughout history of independent Kenya. Odhiambo states that the remedy of the problem lies in proper governance and non-ethnic politics but quickly adds that this is impossible for:

> Kenya Africans do not talk of ethnicity in their offices… or in whispers along the streets. They talk and think about tribalism as the regular experience of their everyday lives… they use tribalism as a practical vocabulary of politics and social movement[3].

The answer then cannot be in better governance for ethnicity is a problem of the orientation of culture rather than one of politics. It is here that Christianity must offer guidance seeing that the majority of Kenyans are Christians especially in our area of concern: Molo constituency. This gives room for the necessity of a theology that addresses the question of ethnicity. The Church has in the past kept quiet about this issue choosing rather to be involved in offering humanitarian aid rather than spiritual and socio-political guidance. It is time for the Church to take up the challenge of engaging this problem for the Church has a key to resolving this problem albeit in the coming generation of Kenyans who have not drank the venom of ethnic hatred. It is this understanding that gives impetus to the study of the Bible in order to arrive at theology that will address this situation, a task to which we must now turn.

The Content of Acts 17:24-28

The passage is taken from Paul's address to the Athenians at the Areopagus, on Mars Hill, on their idolatry. Paul in this passage is not dealing with the question of ethnicity, but one might capture hints of it as Paul attacks the feelings of superiority in the Athenians. We ought to bear in mind that Athens was the cradle of philosophy and the epitome of Greek pride, hence, to be Athenian was to be civilized and schooled in the philosophy of the day.[4] We therefore may not rule out Paul's intention of dealing with their ethnic pride even as he dealt with their idolatry, for it was

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[3] E.S. Atieno Odhiambo, "Hegemonic Enterprises & Instrumentality of Survival: Ethnicity & Democracy in Kenya" In *Ethnicity and Democracy in Africa,* 172.

[4] John Calvin "Acts" In The *Crossway Classic Commentary,* edited by Alister Mc Grath & J.I Packer, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1995), 295.

their view of themselves that made them blind to the true God. It has also been argued that Paul may have been arguing in defense of a Jewish school in Athens which was looked down upon. Scholars, who argue this way, point to archeological findings that reveal tombstones with Jewish names upon them.[5] We need not make so much out of this, since Jews were scattered all over the province of Achaia, just as in Asia Minor and so their presence in Athens is not a surprise. Paul captures timeless truths that we ought to look at critically in order to resolve our problems with negative ethnicity.

Paul begins at the very beginning by talking about God whom the Athenians do not know but worship in ignorance. He identifies God as the creator of all that there is on earth. Paul also, in verse 24 states that God is above the realm of the activity of human beings, though he actually dwells among them. It is the same thought that is communicated in verse 25 where he states that God does not need anything from human beings though he gives all things to them. In other words, God is self sufficient[6]. In the same verse Paul also looks at human beings as limited and in need of God's help in all their essential requirements in life. We should be led to the inevitable conclusion then that even the wealth of the Athenians ultimately belongs to God; they owe Him even their very lives.

Verse 26 introduces a new thought that of the origin of different nations. He states that God made all nations from one person. The purpose of this creation being that man would in habit the entire earth. Paul further states that it is God who determines the dwelling places of human beings and even the season in which they should occupy different places on earth. It is also noteworthy, that in this verse Paul introduces the idea of human beings bein g distributed all over the earth as an act of God. This idea is not strange to scripture. Paul is simply echoing the truth as recorded Genesis 10-11, in the story of the tower of Babel, and also the statement in Deuteronomy, which also states that borders of nations and even their gods were set by God[7]. The "times appointed" is a statement strategically located in order to force the Athenians to reflect on the temporal nature of life; this may be their season to be in Athens but in another time and generation Athens could be occupied by others[8].

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[5] Irina Levinskaya, *The Book of Acts in the First Century Setting*, (Vol. 5) (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub. Co.), 1996, 158.

[6] F.F. Bruce, *The book of Acts,* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1954), 357.

[7] Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998), 527.

[8] Bruce, 358.

In verse 27 Paul identifies the reason of human beings being distributed on the face of the earth as being God's desire of them to worship him. Paul is further advancing his idea that God is in control by stating that the habitation of human beings is not by chance or the genius of human beings, but that the invisible hand of God is behind it.[9] We must bear in mind that it is not the action of scattering people that causes them to seek God; God designed it that way from the beginning. Paul again may be alluding to the fact that it was the rebellion in Babel that caused the scattering, hence when people come closer to God then they realize that they are one[10]. The irony here is that the Athenians were claiming to be the epitome of civilization thereby discriminating against other people. Paul then cuts through their impunity by showing to them that their pride actually reveals their ignorance.

Paul summarizes his treatise with a poetic quotation from one of the Athenian poets in verse 28, stating that it is because of God that we all have the ability to move and are alive. He summarily states that we are all God's offspring; a thought that he will pick up in the subsequent verses to argue his case for the need for a relationship with God. The quotation from their poets must be seen, not as an appeal to authority, but as a rebuke to the Athenians; they have always had this truth and yet have not understood it. Lasor states that by this quotation, "He is stabbing at the heart of Athenian pride and Greek racial superiority. He is putting God at the center of the universe...."[11] We must concur, because to the Greek philosophy was everything and therefore to quote their poets was the ultimate demonstration of how far they had misunderstood the facts.

The Theology of Acts 17: 24-28

The Sovereignty of God

Paul identifies for us the fact that God is above all and that He is unquestioned in all that He does. The sovereignty of God is revealed not only in the fact of the creation, but also in the distribution and sustenance of all ethnic races. This truth is profound for it punctures through the human tendency to be puffed up and to emphasize the "otherliness" and over

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[9] Calvin, 302.

[10] Witherington III, 528.

[11] William Sanford Lasor, *Church Alive*, (Glendale: Regal Books Division, 1972), 273.

emphasizing ones "ethnic correctness."[12] It is a truth that should make human beings realize that they are dependent not on their ethnic identity but on a higher identity. The impact of this should be felt in the way people relate by realizing that all resources belong to God and no one ought to claim monopoly of use of the resource. This should help in the clash prone area of Molo constituency where perceived ethnic superiority is used to decide who has monopoly over the other in the use of natural resources.

Unity of the Human Race

Another essential teaching of this passage is the emphasis in our understanding of anthropology. We note that human beings are essentially one; they are descended from one person and that this is by God's design. God is the author of diversity which is His way of dealing with man's rebellion (Gen.11). It is therefore a fact that, the further a person goes from God the more discriminative one becomes. Ethnic communities in Kenya today can benefit a lot by realizing that all ethnic communities are valuable in God's sight; created by Him and for His purpose. This would force them not only to respect each other but also to respect the value of human life. It is also important to note that even the habitation of ethnic communities is not just a result of the socio-political history of the country but it is God's hand.

We must state here that the separation of ethnic communities as way of toning down tension between them is not necessarily an answer to the conflict if anything it fuels the problem. The unfortunate consequence of separation is the continuous escalation of suspicion and hatred[13]. People tend to know each other more when they live together as one community rather than when they fragment into their ethnic groupings. Bauman properly articulates this when he says, "in a community we all understand each other well, we may trust what we hear, we are safe most of the time and hardly ever puzzled or taken aback...."[14] It would then appear that it is God's intention for people to live in their variety rather than to retreat into their ethnic groups. Our theology should then tell us that God intended for us to live as one community in diversity rather than many fragmented groups.

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[12] George A. De Vos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation" In *Ethnic Identity* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 1995), 25.

[13] Mark G. Brett, *Ethnicity and the Bible*, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers Inc., 2002.), 15.

[14] Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 1.

God has a Purpose in Ethnic Diversity

Diversity seems to scare many especially in the socio-political scene. Many tend to feel as though ethnic pluralism must inevitably lead to tensions and mayhem. It is rather unfortunate to note that the most ethnically divisive in our community are the elite who claim to be enlightened and seem to know the purpose of existence more than the general public. The general public sees diversity of culture as a blessing since they learn new things from it; but the elite with a feeling of heroism try to rally their ethnic groups against others for apparently no good reason.[15]

Paul addresses this problem in the passage when he reflects on the fact that the distribution of the ethnic groups is for a particular purpose. God desired that in the recognition of the diversity people would seek him. We must recognize that the object of seeking God is to give him worship as we enter into a living relationship with him. He therefore calls us back to the ultimate reason why man was created (Ecc.12:13): to worship God and continue in a vital relationship with him. This is a profound truth that should evoke awe in us and not hatred of people of other ethnic groups that are different from our own.

Implications of the Study

The Need for Teaching

Thus armed with a transforming theology the Church should take advantage in Molo area and spread the transforming message that diversity is not a cause for conflict but a cause for praise and worship. This truth should reverberate from our pulpits with the transformative force it deserves. The Church ought to be deliberate in the teaching of this truth not just from the pulpit but also in Bible studies and in the community groups where she is ably represented by her members. It is regrettable that the Church remains quiet and only plays the role of a relief agent when the violence occurs. De Vos observes that, "religious conversion is a means of abandoning ones ethnic identity by adopting a transcendent world view."[16] In this then it does not matter what the popular opinion about the other community is. Christians can introduce new popular opinion by offering God's version of things hence abandoning the popular stance. The Church in Molo constituency should seize the opportunity and preach the gospel of

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[15] Ngugi Wa Thiong'o "The Language of African Literature" In *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader* edited by Roxy Harris & Ben Rampton (London: Routledge, 2003), 79.

[16] De Vos, 21

social transformation for this is powerful door for many to the kingdom of God. The Church should realize that the people are undergoing a social crisis and are disillusioned not only with the political systems but also their ethnic heritage. It is only the transforming gospel of Christ that can help in such a situation.

The Need for Involvement

"The preacher or minister as... a social leader, now finds requirements of his role shifting from accommodation towards confrontation and protest."[17] The Church is thrust so forcefully in the middle of the problem that she can extricate herself from the requirement to ascend the public podium to provide the spiritual and socio-political guidance required in such a community. It is very sad to observe the clergy go about their duty of feeding the displaced and preaching to them rather than coupling these noble actions with advocacy. The very politicians who fuel ethnic tensions attend Church services and not even a word of godly counsel is given by the pastor.

The media in Kenya takes very keen interest in the voice of the religious groups in Kenya the Church ought not to be silent in the issue of negative ethnicity. She should call to account all reckless talk in the public domain that fuels hatred and incites to violence. If the Church is the conscience of the community it does not help if she keeps quiet in the areas that affect the nation negatively.

The Need for Healing

We live in an age where many have been bruised by the instances of violence that have occurred in Molo constituency. Many are have lost property and homes in the skirmishes and are living as squatters in Church, government or private land as squatters. The Church should look with mercy on these individuals and help them be resettled in their original homes. This can only happen if the Church believes that the true way forward is not just escaping the problem through resettlement, but rather head on confrontation through facilitating healing and reconciliation.

The restoration of a community that acknowledges the theology of Acts17:24-28 is the onus of the Church. In this regard the Church has a head start for the communities living in the Molo constituency mainly share Christianity as a common religion. It has been observed that a shared

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17 Ibid, 22

religion may be the strongest basis of identity in a community the strongest balm that can attends to the wounds of the community[18]. The Church should not only attempt healing for whole communities but also attend to the woes of individuals. This should be done not only by introducing the individuals to Christ but by also offering necessary counselling so that their wounds would really heal.

Conclusion

Acts 17:24-28 is a gemstone that every Church in Molo constituency ought to understand, teach and act upon. The Church should lead in paving the way for other stake holders in efforts to regain calmness and order in the clash torn constituency. The answer to this lies not in the separation of warring communities but rather in true and genuine healing based on the theology of Acts 17:24-28.

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[18] Thomas A. Lewis, "On the Limits of Narrative: Communities in Pluralistic Society" *Journal of Religion*, 86.1, 55.

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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND CHARACTER[*]

Keith Ferdinando

Theological educators of all people should be aware of the critical importance of character in the preparation of those who will lead the people of God. Of course, character is important in any area of training: laziness, dishonesty, arrogance are likely to cause problems in most walks of life. But in theological programmes an unbalanced emphasis on the academic dimension of training may mean that concern for character is sidelined. The following brief reflections on four biblical passages seek to suggest *why* character should be a central concern – perhaps *the* central concern – for any serious programme of theological education.

1. BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT JESUS INTENDED (MATTHEW 4:18-20)

1 Training fishers of men

The assumption with which this article begins, is that the purpose of theological and biblical training should be the same as that of Jesus – indeed, that if we were looking for a theology of theological education, we should probably start with his approach to the training of the twelve. In very brief terms his understanding of theological education is set out in the call of Simon and Andrew: he called his disciples in order to train them to be fishers of men. 'Come, follow me ... and I will make you fishers of men.'

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The phrase is simple but rich in meaning. Jesus trained the twelve – his students – to prepare them to engage in God's mission in the world, a mission directed to the redemption of lost human beings. Accordingly, all authentically Christian training should have the same nature. Thus, despite the fact that our contexts are very different from that of first century Palestine, what is done in every sort of biblical or theological training programme should bear more than a passing resemblance – in intention, method and content – to what Jesus did as he taught his disciples, and we should make every effort to bring our various programmes into line with God's purpose as it is seen in the mission of his Son. In short, our aim as theological educators must be missiological, just as that of Jesus was: there is, as Carson says, a 'straight line from this commission to the Great Commission' at the end of Matthew's gospel.[1]

Thus, if we are not preparing men and women to take part in God's mission, then we are missing the point. This does not mean that they are all necessarily going to be evangelists or missionaries in the general sense of those terms, but that they are all going to be involved in one way or another – and as their primary objective – in facilitating the mission of God's people. The content and method of programmes of theological education should therefore reflect that fundamental concern.

2 Following Jesus

Training fishers of men meant following Jesus: 'follow me and I will make you fishers of men.' The notion of *following* a teacher was a distinctive one, for it was not a metaphor that was used at the time of those who studied with a rabbi.[2] In the contemporary culture disciples attached themselves to teachers, and Jesus is exceptional in calling the disciples he wanted, rather than having them seek him out.[3] Moreover, his approach to teaching them is novel. Rabbis used a rather formal teaching approach and, while Jesus did use formal teaching, his followers were also to learn from experience – observing and imitating Jesus, following his itinerant lifestyle,

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[1] Carson, D. A., *Matthew,* in F.E. Gaebelein (ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary,* vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

[2] Guelich, R. A., *Mark 1:1-8:26,* (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 50.

[3] Kapolyo, J., 'Matthew' in T. Adeyemo (ed.), *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1117.

joining in his ministry and closely relating to him. It was a 'holistic' experience – a training that embraced every aspect of their lives.[4]

Consequently that implied not just hearing and learning from his words – although they did that too – but following the life he lived, and bearing an increasing resemblance to the sort of person he was. He modelled what his disciples were to become – they were to be like him, and so to follow him in a very literal sense. Paul brought that implication out explicitly: 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1). Following was not just about walking behind him, nor about learning his teaching in a purely cognitive sense, but about living the sort of life he lived and having the sort of character he had.

3 Character traits of Jesus

Evidently at this point the scope of discipleship becomes huge. Many aspects of following Jesus are indicated in the gospels, but we might notice just three.

First there is a spirit of dependence on God. It is an attitude – a character trait – of humility and trust. It is evident, for example, in Jesus' strong life of prayer, which is seen most clearly in Gethsemane. It comes through again very strongly in words he uses in the gospel of John: '"My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work"' (4:34); 'I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does' (5:19). It is vital that training somehow communicate this for the disciple is sent out as Jesus was, with the same characteristics of dependence and humble submission: 'as the Father has sent me, I am sending you' (John 20:21). Education, sadly, can produce the opposite spirit: the higher the qualification, the greater the danger of pride and self-sufficiency. It is therefore vital that we constantly remember the dangers of intellectual pride – 'knowledge puffs up' (1 Cor 8:1) – the besetting sin of the student and, indeed, of his teacher. It would perhaps be no bad thing if the words of Paul were put up over the doors of our institutions: 'For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?' (1 Cor 4:7).

Second, there is a spirit of compassion, which is seen in Jesus' attitude towards the crowd (Mat 9:36). Crowds can be seen in different ways, many

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[4] Collinson, S. W., *Making Disciples: The Significance of Jesus' Methods for Today's Church* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004), 37.

of them negative, but he saw them as 'harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.' Moreover, this was true of him even though he well understood the fickleness, incomprehension, and even unbelief of those who came to him. There is no truly Christian ministry without compassion towards those whom we serve, but there is the danger of a judgemental and censorious attitude, especially for those relatively well-versed in the Scriptures. This was the pitfall of the Pharisees: 'this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them' (Jn 7:49). Unless compassion characterises our students, we risk producing Christian Pharisees.

Third, there is a spirit of service and sacrifice. Jesus' own words indicate something of the nature of his relationship with his disciples: 'I am among you as one who serves' (Lk 22:27). They were not chosen to be his personal servants as could be the case with the rabbis' disciples; rather he served them and, in so doing, gave them an example (Jn 13:13-15).[5] And the disciples were specifically called to a life defined by the bearing of a cross: 'if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Mt 18:21-25). There is again a contrast with the rabbinic schools which valued security,[6] and Jesus therefore warned would-be disciples about the cost of following him (Mt 8:20-22): it was not like being the disciple of some other teacher. And then he modelled the cross-shaped life before his disciples. The constant New Testament testimony is that the gospel advances through the suffering, the human weakness and pain, of its servants. The danger is that theological students may see their education and qualifications precisely as the means to avoid suffering and to *be* served – the pathway to a desk in the church administrative offices, to respect and veneration, maybe even to relative wealth in whatever form. Theological education – our own institutions – should not be a ladder to ease but a gateway to suffering.

4 Method

Jesus did not simply teach these things verbally but he modelled them, so that disciples could *in practice* follow him. Of course, he did teach – he used words, he told stories, he drew implications – and so should theological educators. But Jesus' students saw him visibly depending on the Father in prayer; they saw him sharing his life with those who came to him, and ministering to them, even when tired and seeking rest; they saw –

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[5] Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 20 ('Students of the rabbis served them as slaves …'), 36.

[6] Collinson, *Making Disciples*, 51.

and experienced – him wash their own feet, and they were with him when he was opposed, insulted, mocked, and crucified.

Teachers always model: their lives necessarily speak to their students. The vital thing is to know what they are modelling. By their attitudes and behaviour – towards colleagues, students, work, the church and so on – they and their institutions teach an invisible curriculum; for better or worse they display a character which will powerfully impact their students with perhaps lifelong effect. Whether they will or not, theological educators are shaping character as Jesus did, but perhaps not always in the same ways.

Character is important in training, because it was important to Jesus; and it was important to him because it was vitally and organically linked to the task for which he called his disciples – the mission of God. It is those who reflect something of the character of Jesus who can fish for men. And if we are not training others for that purpose, what are we doing it for? It should be our central concern that our students are followers of Jesus, and so become fishers of men.

2 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT TRUTH SHOULD PRODUCE (ROMANS 12:1-2)

Character should be a critical concern in theological education because exposure to truth ought to produce transformed lives – renewed character. Exposure to truth is in fact a dangerous thing. When the gospel is preached it brings life to those who respond, but for those who reject it their situation is made even worse for, to rebellion, they have added the refusal of God's grace in Christ. Similarly, for believers opportunity increases responsibility. Jesus indicated this: 'From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded' (Lk 12:47-48). So those who have had great opportunities to learn from God and grow in understanding, are accountable before him for their use of such opportunities, and for what they have become as a result. The same principle is reflected in what James says about teachers: 'Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly' (3:1).

This means that our students, constantly exposed to the word of God, are accountable for what they do with it – or, perhaps more accurately, for what it does with them. They have a responsibility to ensure that it accomplishes in their lives what God intends, which is far more than merely head-knowledge. On the same basis, their teachers have a responsibility to make certain that their students understand that, and to facilitate the process. In short, character is important in theological training, because renewed character – changed persons, and not just increased knowledge –

is what the word of God is intended to produce. If students can sit for years at a time studying the Bible and Christian theology, and there is no consequence in terms of transformation – and indeed, if there may even be change for the worse – then there are serious problems, perhaps with the programme, or the teaching, or the students, or even maybe the teachers themselves.

Paul's words in Romans 12:1-2 should help us to reflect on this issue. We can identify three main steps in the argument.

1 Living sacrifices

Firstly, Christians should offer to God the worship of whole lives: 'to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship'. The gospel leads to a new creation, one that expresses itself in the believers' joyful sacrifice of themselves to their creator and redeemer—which is where their real joy and satisfaction lie, and which constitutes their *truest worship*. It is not a matter of Sunday services or of singing choruses, but a reality that embraces the whole of life in every sphere in which the believer lives.

This is absolutely fundamental, but such 'living sacrifices' emerge in response to what Paul has been saying throughout the preceding chapters. Thus the text is prefaced by the word *therefore*: it is the knowledge that Paul's readers have absorbed from Romans 1-11 that should lead them to offer themselves as sacrifices. Furthermore, their response is based on God's mercies – 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy....' These are the mercies that Paul has been expounding throughout those chapters and which are the very content of the gospel. Thus Paul's long exposition of human sin, of justification and sanctification, of assurance and the work of the Spirit, and his discussion of Israel and of the inclusion of Gentile believers among the people of God—all this should bring serious readers of the letter to offer themselves as living sacrifices.

The focal point, then, is that knowledge of God's mercies should so penetrate hearts and attitudes that bodies – whole persons –yield themselves up as sacrifices to him. The Roman Christians – and all later readers – having absorbed the teaching of this letter, are responsible to live out its consequences. The entry of truth into their experience thus changes their reality – it puts them in a new place existentially, so that they are no longer what they were before. It is not just about information – not just that they have acquired another epistle to put in the church library – but the terms under which they live have radically changed, for they are now so much more responsible before God to live in conformity with the truth that

he has revealed. Truth should not just inform minds, but it should lead to the total consecration of lives as God intends it to do. It should impact character – hearts, motives, attitudes, dispositions. And if that is not the case, then it has been seriously misunderstood and misused.

2 Transformed minds

Paul goes on to point to a further, but related, consequence, which begins as a negative: 'And do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world ...' The word *and* is missing in the NIV translation but is a vital link with the preceding thought. The positive worship of God ('to offer your bodies as living sacrifices') entails also a negative, namely non-conformity to the world – an ongoing refusal to go the world's way. The same idea is present throughout the New Testament. In 1 Peter 1:1-2 for example, Peter makes just two primary points which then significantly inform the argument of the whole epistle: believers are people who are chosen by God and who therefore become strangers in the world. Consequently they are to live as strangers (1 Pt 1:17; 2:11), in conscious and ongoing refusal of the world's mind and practice.

But such a refusal of conformity does not just happen, and so Paul goes on: '... but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' The expression is clearly important: transformation into non-conformity is a question of minds. There is a basic assumption that we are, in a sense, our minds – what we live emerges from what we think. It is the content and disposition of the mind that fashions character and so determines action. Rather like computers, what is put into the mind determines more or less what comes out. So, Paul implies, our minds have been programmed to act in conformity with a fallen world and with the old pre-Christian nature. Human beings 'go with the flow', adopting the worldview and habits of their cultures, which themselves reflect the fallenness of those who have constructed them. They follow 'the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air' (Eph 2:2). If that is to change minds need to be renewed – to be reprogrammed. Old patterns of thought must be replaced by new ones. There needs to be a Christian mind – a character change – such that believers think, and so act, 'christianly'. The problem is that so often this does not happen. 'The Christian mind has succumbed to the secular drift with a degree of weakness and nervelessness unmatched in Christian history'.[7]

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[7] Blamires, H., *Recovering the Christian Mind* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1988), 9.

Paul does not say how the renewing of minds should happen. Essentially of course, like every aspect of the believer's sanctification, the renewal of minds is the work of the Holy Spirit, whose purpose it is so to transform men and women that they are changed into the image of Christ. However, at the same time change will not occur in the absence of intentionality on the Christian's part. Thus, here they are commanded – 'be transformed'; the imperative necessarily indicates that they are not simply to be passive and expect transformation to take place independently of their own intention and involvement. Rather they are to be actively engaged in it by putting into their minds those things which will promote change and produce a Christian worldview, a new set of assumptions, values and ambitions. And that implies the steady assimilation of the word of God. The Scriptures themselves stress their own efficacy in changing people. Jesus taught that the truth sets free (Jn 8:32), releasing men and women from the slavery of ingrained sinful dispositions (Jn 8:34); the truth of God's word sanctifies – 'sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth' (Jn 17:17); and it 'penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart (Heb 4:12). To put it another way, if minds are to reflect God's mind, then God's thinking must be put into them.

Thus, Paul is consolidating what he said in the first verse. There the truth should lead to the worship of a sacrificial commitment to God the redeemer; here it should lead to renewed minds that make such transformation a reality. In both cases truth should not simply *inform*, but *transform*.

3 Testing and approving

But there is a third point. Renewed minds make renewed judgements: they 'test and approve what God's will is ...' Minds exist for thought, and those that are renewed by God's Spirit and word are able to make judgements that reflect his wisdom and righteousness. God does not give his people volumes of detailed commandments to live by: there is no Christian *mishnah*. Rather he creates godly renewed minds with which they may think. The result is an obedience that flows from transformed character, rather than from compliance with a set of rules.

4 Conclusions

All of this brings us back to theological education. Teachers teach and so they address minds, but what happens to those minds? They may simply be pumped up with knowledge, or they may be stirred to worship, non-

conformity, and transformation. Is the consequence of training that our students are able to discern 'what God's will is'? There are some clear implications.

First, theological education must imply the humble seeking of God's grace for both teacher and student. The transformation of minds is fundamentally the Spirit's work, and prayerful dependence on him is vital if that is to take place. Paul's writings are repeatedly characterised by doxology and prayer; they breathe a different spirit from that of the detached and rationalistic investigations of the university. And in the same way staff and students must develop the habit of a reflective, prayerful, doxological approach to study.

Second, there must be an intentional pursuit of character transformation about the teaching of theology. Teachers cannot of course produce or guarantee transformation, but they may hinder it—or facilitate it—by the way in which the task is approached. Programmes, courses and lessons must be prepared with the ultimate goal of mind-renewal. The word of God itself should never be simply an object to be studied in a detached way (as we shall notice later), but rather received as what it is: God's own speech to men and women – to be reflected on, ingested and submitted to.

Third, transformation is about Christian character – about wisdom – and not about Christian rule-keeping. True theological teaching therefore pursues an understanding of God's perfect will, rather than a preoccupation with the quantity of material covered. Paul frequently invites his readers to engage intelligently with what he is writing, and to think it through for themselves. So he write to the Corinthians, 'I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say' (1 Cor 10:15), and to Timothy 'Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this' (2 Tim 2:7). He wants his teaching to do more than just furnish a mental database. And in theological education this means constantly raising with students the 'so what' question: 'how should we then live?'

Finally, and returning to where we began, teachers do their students a disservice if they are not made aware of the responsibility not to be hearers (and note-takers!) only, but to let the word have its effect in their lives. If that fails to happen, it means that the truth remains sterile, and those who have received it are worse off than if they had never heard, 'from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded ...'

3 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT MINISTRY REQUIRES (1 PETER 5:1-14)

Theological educators train students to engage in Christian ministry of one form or another. The qualifications and competences that they may need are no doubt innumerable but, whatever the ministry may be, character is vital. Towards the end of his epistle Peter raises the issue with the elders of the churches he is addressing.

A great concern in the letter is to help believers respond to the persecution they face, and the longest section (3:13-4:19) speaks about the problem of sufferings endured for the sake of Christ. Following that passage a brief paragraph (5:1-4) begins with the word 'therefore' – a word omitted from the NIV but significant nevertheless: 'therefore, to the elders among you I appeal as a fellow elder.' In it Peter answers this question: in the light of the trials that believers face *as* believers, what sort of people should their leaders be? The health of the people of God depends in great measure on those who lead them, and that the more so as they face all the problems that attach to living as Christians – as strangers – in the world. And for such leaders to be effective, the issue of character is vital.

1 Appeal

Peter grounds his appeal to the leaders on his own experience of the work to which he calls them. He learned from Christ and, by this stage in his life, has already been engaged in more or less 30 years of Christian leadership. So his words emerge from extensive experience and from the teaching of the Chief Shepherd himself. Thus, he is a fellow elder along with those he writes to, engaged in the same work of caring for God's people. He is not remote from the task, and does not speak theoretically from some ivory tower. What he urges is what he does. Like them his special responsibility is to bear witness to the sufferings of Christ which are at the very heart of the gospel, and which define the nature of Christian discipleship. And, also like them, he does these things looking forward to the reward that must come to those who are faithful.

The appeal, then, is that they should shepherd the flock entrusted to them, and there are important things one might discuss in the exhortation itself. One is the nature of shepherding – the activity that is assumed in the passage, that of watching over the people of God. Peter does not go into this here, although the whole of the letter is in fact an exercise in such shepherding. Another is the fact that it is God's flock, an expression which emphasises both the privilege given to leadership and also their responsibility. There is a parallel thought in Paul's address to the Ephesian

elders when he refers to 'the church of God which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28). But the critical issue here is not so much what the elders do but rather the way in which they do it – the attitudes which they bring to leadership, their character.

2 Attitude

So, Peter does not deal so much here with the pastoral task, nor with the practical skills that are required for it. These are no doubt important: there are skills that must be learned in order to care for God's people and communicate the gospel. However, of at least equal concern to Peter are the attitudes with which leaders carry out their work, and this is indeed the more fundamental issue. It is not so much what the pastor does, but the spirit with which he does it – the character which he brings to the task – that Peter deals with. If the attitude is right somehow or other the work will be done well: character is the central issue. It is a striking contrast to approaches that stress technique and skills rather than motives and hearts. This is not to deny the importance of skills – much damage can be done by those who attempt the task while lacking the necessary skills. But having the right disposition should drive the leader to look for the skills and to use them.

The issues Peter addresses are those of motive, money and power, but they are closely linked and somewhat overlapping. First, the leaders' work is to be done, 'not because you must, but because you are willing.' They are not to be motivated by a somewhat unwilling sense of constraint or obligation, not simply seeing their role as a job that somebody has to do, but labouring out of a sincere desire and a sense of privilege and joy: 'the emphasis exceeds voluntarism to include a joyful embrace of God's will.'[8] Such an attitude is rooted in a genuine love for the one they serve, as Peter suggests: 'as God wants you to be.' It is striking that Jesus' personal commission to Peter – 'feed my sheep' – followed directly on the question, 'do you love me?' (Jn 21:15-17) Care for the people of God can only be undertaken by those who truly love the one who bought them, and that love is grounded in their relationship with him and in a sense of the wonder of his grace towards them.

It is very obvious when people work grudgingly – because they have to. It may be a particular danger at a time of persecution or difficulty when all is simply burdensome. And there is the danger of keeping going in a job when

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[8] Laniak, T. S., *Shepherds after my own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible* (Downers Grove and Leicester: IVP and Apollos, 2006), 233.

the willingness has gone, out of a sense of duty, or moral coercion, or obligation – even obligation to a supposed call. When that happens, the lack of real willingness becomes evident. Transformed character is the critical element out of which true motivation for Christian service flows – a love of Christ, love of his gospel, love of his people.

Second, the elders must work '… not greedy for money, but eager to serve.' This is a sensitive issue. Many passages teach quite clearly that the labourer is worthy of his hire (Lk 10:7); that those who serve the gospel have the right to a living from it (1 Cor 9:14); that the ox should not be muzzled as it treads the grain (1 Tim 5:18). This is important and too often forgotten in African churches.

However, Peter is saying that the elder does not work *for* the money—it is not the money that motivates him in his labours, and that gets him up and sends him out to work each day. No doubt very many people do work precisely for the wage that comes at the end of the week or the month. But the elders should work because they are eager to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and his people, and the financial recompense they receive is simply what makes concentration on the task possible. The issue here, then, is not whether people are paid or not, but what their motive is for doing the work. They should be paid, but they do not serve *because* they are paid – they serve because they are eager to do so. 'Although the financial support of the congregations may help the elders fulfill their ministries, Peter insists that it must never become a necessary inducement for them to serve.'[9]

There are different types of soldier. Some fight for their country and their people out of loyalty and patriotism. They may well be paid, but their motive is not the money but the protection of their families, their homes and their nation. Others are mercenaries who fight because they are paid and, when the pay ceases, they stop fighting and go home for they have no interest in the cause itself. Similarly, Jesus contrasts himself, as the good shepherd, with the mercenary – the hired hand – and perhaps Peter has his words partly in mind: 'The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away' (John 10:12). The motive of the hired hand is a purely mercenary one: he has no real concern for the sheep, nor for the shepherd, and abandons the task when problems arise. The words are deeply challenging and force us to ask whether we are hired hands ourselves – and whether we are training hired hands. The critical importance of the invisible curriculum again comes into focus here: what do students see in their

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[9] Michaels, J. R., *1 Peter* (Dallas: Word Books, 2002), 285.

teachers?—for their teachers' attitudes towards salary and material wellbeing necessarily communicate themselves to those they teach.

Disinterested service comes out of a desire to serve the master. And the principle can be extended further because there may be other ulterior and unworthy motives that keep Christian workers at the job. They should be eager to serve – not eager for the first place, not eager for the prestige, not eager for the title and whatever may go with it. It is not about cash, or any other human advantage. The same theme emerges in Paul's own testimony as he wrote to the Philippians: 'I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want' (Phil 4:12).

Third, they are to serve '... not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.' The possession of power reveals the leader's real character. Power corrupts, and leaders quickly assimilate to the models they see in the world around them. As Peter wrote he could readily remember how the pursuit of power had more than once divided the apostles themselves during the earthly ministry of Jesus, even at the Last Supper (Mk 9:33-37; 10:35-45; Lk 22:24-28), and it was an issue in the Old Testament too: 'You have ruled them harshly and brutally' (Ezek 34:4). Leadership can be undertaken simply for the sake of power, at which point leaders serve themselves rather than those they lead. And when that happens there are consequences: relationships are disrupted as rivals bid for position – as had happened among the disciples; people are kept down rather than being encouraged to develop, lest they threaten the leader's position; openness and transparency are likely to suffer; and there is schism, the destruction of Christian testimony, the defiling of the gospel. Love grows cold as ambitions grow hot.

But, as Peter points out, truly counter-cultural Christian leadership is not about control, but is rather focused in the example of a godly life. It is not about telling people what they should *do*, but showing them what they should *be* – a life that mirrors Christ himself and incarnates what the words are saying. As we have noted already, the pastor says, like Paul (if not explicitly), 'Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ' (1 Cor 11:1). All of which means a life of sacrifice for the sake of the sheep: they need to *see* true Christian faith lived out – Christ in the lives of their leaders. Character is again absolutely foundational.

Theological educators need to focus intentionally on these characteristics and on what produces them; their own lives, as leaders and servants within their institutions, must reflect them.

3 Hope

There is one final point to notice in the text. On both sides of his exhortation Peter refers to the reward that is promised to those who faithfully serve: 'the glory to be revealed ... the crown of glory that will never fade away.' It is a central theme of the epistle, which stresses Christian hope from the very beginning, and it is especially powerful in that Peter himself is speaking 'with the intense focus that comes from being close to death.'[10] Hope is what should inspire and stimulate Christian life and ministry – and the motives and ambitions that drive them. Thus earlier Peter urges his readers to set their hope on the grace to be given to them (1:13). Moreover, this is another reminder that the teaching of theology should be transformative in intention. New Testament eschatology is not an academic debate over various millennial positions: it is rather what should motivate and transfigure the present. Shifting the hope of students from the present and visible – from the pursuit of money, power and position, for example – to the eternal and the invisible, changes character, and produces ministry that glorifies God and edifies his people.

4 BECAUSE THIS IS WHAT TEACHING DEMANDS (1 TIMOTHY 4:1-16)

In 1 Timothy 4 Paul addresses Timothy specifically as a teacher of Christian truth. The passage shows that certain character traits are necessary in order to carry out the teaching role faithfully and effectively. Without them Timothy – and any other theological educator – will be crippled in what he tries to do. Moreover, and implicitly, the presence of these traits – or indeed their absence – will communicate to the students. Again, teachers teach as much by what they are as by what they say, and the priorities and attitudes they bring to their teaching are visible and also critical to what students learn. 'In Africa, we have many teachers who possess impressive diplomas, but what we need are models that Christians can imitate.'[11]

1 Submission

The text raises, first, a fundamental issue of spiritual and theological commitment. Paul responds to a teaching that was producing a form of asceticism: 'They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods.' It emerged out of the Greek worldview in which the material

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[10] Laniak, *Shepherds after my own Heart*, 234.

[11] Andria, S., '1 Timothy' in *Africa Bible Commentary*, 1476.

world was viewed negatively. Such beliefs could have one of two consequences: they might lead to asceticism, as here, or to debauchery. Whichever it was, the consequences in terms of ethics were negative. Paul's response is to refute the error by going back to the doctrine of creation, and in so doing he reflects a commitment to revealed truth and an attitude of submission towards it that should be basic for any Christian teacher. In studying and teaching the teacher submits to what God has spoken, humbly aware of the limits of human reason and of its right use. It is the reversal of the sin of Eden, where Adam and Eve determined to decide matters of truth themselves, independently of God's own word.

Accordingly, human speculation and reasoning about God and truth and salvation, are kept within the boundaries of God's word. It does not mean that the teacher does not use his mind: on the contrary, here Paul uses his critical faculties to identify the issue at the heart of the ascetic approach he is challenging, and to respond to it. However, reason is put at the service of revealed truth – it is not allowed to fly free and become autonomous. Revelation therefore sets the boundaries of so-called academic freedom. In particular such submission to God's word is distinct from an attitude that allows one's teaching to be shaped by cultural preoccupations and assumptions, which is what was at issue here. The Christian teacher is first of all a serious student of the word of God, to which he is intellectually captive – 'we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ' (2 Cor 10:5).

2 Courage

Paul's response to this issue is also a reminder that teaching will at times require courage. It is easy to speak truth when there is general consensus on where it lies, such that it is uncontested. Affirming the doctrine of creation and the goodness of all that God has made – marriage, food and so on, as in this text – may not be so controversial today as it was in Paul's time. But what he was saying was profoundly counter-cultural in a Greek milieu, and risked provoking serious opposition. He needed courage to speak out.

The character issue, then, is that of having the courage needed to communicate truth – no doubt graciously and without rancour – in situations where it is unwelcome. There are numerous examples of this in church history. Athanasius was five times driven into exile from Alexandria, of which he was the bishop, because of his unwillingness to compromise fundamental truth regarding the person of Christ. At the Diet of Worms Luther refused to give way before the power of church and empire, despite

the very real possibility that he would pay for his stand with his life, as Hus had done only 100 or so years previously at the council of Constance: 'Unless I am convinced by Scripture and plain reason – I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other – my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. God help me.' And in the African context Byang Kato took on the theological establishment of his day for the sake of the gospel – and to his own cost.[12]

Of course, there is a need for right attitude and for discernment. On the one hand the teacher's concern must be precisely *for truth*: it is not simply to prevail or to get the better of opponents. This is a fundamental issue: whose glory are we concerned for? On the other hand, we must identify the battles we really need to fight, and avoid divisive disputing on issues of lesser importance. There is a thin line here, and the distinction between questions of primary and secondary importance is not always easily made; however, for the sake of the peace of the church and its unity discernment is vital – bringing us back to Paul's challenge in Romans 12. The examples cited above all concerned issues fundamental to the health of the church, on which a principled and courageous stand for truth was essential. We must identify in our own generation where the battle lines have to be drawn, and then we must have the courage to contend for truth. This is how Luther expressed it: 'If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God except that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing him. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battlefield besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.'[13]

3 Godliness

Paul makes an interesting contrast in verse 7: 'Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.' He

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[12] Bowers, P., 'Evangelical Theology in Africa: Byang Kato's Legacy' in *TrinJ* 1 NS (1980), 86.

[13] Luther, M., *Church Postil* (Minneapolis: Lutheran in All Lands Co, 1903), quoted by D. J. Hall, "The Diversity of Christian Witnessing in the Tension between Subjection to the Word and the Relation to the Context" in P. Manns & H. Meyer (eds.) *Luther's Ecumenical Significance and Interconfessional Consultation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 257.

urges Timothy to avoid idle and fruitless theological speculation, but rather to pursue godliness. Thus, as he encourages him as a teacher, a central element of his teaching ministry must be his relationship with God – prayer, the pursuit of God, the fear of God. While of course the teacher's mind is engaged in what he does, the issues he deals with require more than reason for their comprehension. Real understanding emerges out of a relationship with the God of whom theology should speak, for he is the true source of all knowledge of himself. The Bible is a word from God to us, and not just a word about God.

To put this another way, God cannot be the object of our theological study as if we could somehow put him under the microscope. He is rather the one in whose presence alone true theological study can take place. Theology is primarily about coming into relationship *with him* – not about objectively studying facts *about him*; hence the importance of the teacher's own godliness. In his *Little Exercise for Young Theologians* Thielicke points out the danger for the theologian of increasingly speaking of God in the third rather than the second person, and so moving from a 'personal relationship with God to a merely technical reference'. He goes on, 'a theological thought can breathe only in the atmosphere of dialogue with God.'[14]

Thus the teacher does not just communicate facts of theology or Scripture, but seeks to draw students into a knowledge of the God of whom Scripture and, hopefully, theology speaks. Of particular relevance here is Paul's teaching on the role of the Spirit in understanding and communicating truth. Thus, he says, truth is spiritually discerned – it comes through the work of the Spirit (1 Cor 2:12) – and so it is to the extent that the theologian knows the indwelling of the Spirit of God that he can truly understand the word of God. And then communication of truth is only possible through words that the Spirit alone can give (1 Cor 2:13). 'We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.'

4 Conviction

The teaching role is to be carried out with authority and conviction because what is communicated is God's own word: 'command and teach

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[14] Thielicke, H., *A Little Exercise for Young Theologians* (Carlisle; Paternoster, 1996), 34.

these things' (11). In his cultural context Timothy faced the problem of his youth, which might have led to his being ignored as a teacher, and it seems that he may also have been diffident (2 Tim 1:7; 1 Cor 16:10). Consequently, if he is to speak with conviction, youth and diffidence may mean that the teacher must do that which does not come naturally, to which he is averse, and which may even cause some stress. In such circumstances traits of character need to be developed which defy natural personality and circumstance, and they develop in the presence of God. There are in the text two responses to the problem of youth that are of special significance.

First, it is not the teacher's own natural authority or authoritativeness that is important. The flow of the passage is significant here. The teacher is to be a godly person – one who knows God, learns from him, and submits with humility to his word; thus, he speaks with authority to his hearers because he has been in the presence of God himself. Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3), but with authority he brought the word of God to the people of Israel because he had stood before God. It is that knowledge of God that makes all the difference: the conviction and authority with which a Christian teacher or preacher must address men and women, come out of a relationship of humble submission to God and his word. Second, while Timothy's youth and nervousness might seem to weaken the natural force of his teaching, the conviction with which he teaches can be communicated in ways other than words alone. Thus, in juxtaposition to his exhortation to authoritative teaching, Paul urges Timothy to be an example: 'Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, *but set an example* ...' The example of his life would bring solid credibility and authority to his teaching; its conformity to the message would show that Timothy truly held the truths he taught. And, *vice versa*, when lives do not correspond to teaching, that demonstrates a lack of conviction on the teacher's part.

5 Diligence

Finally Paul insistently urges Timothy to give himself to those activities that would advance his ministry, to demonstrate diligence in his work and his attitude towards it—to please God and serve his people by doing it as well as possible: '... devote yourself ... do not neglect ... be diligent ... give yourself wholly ... persevere ...' There is always a danger of neglect and casualness in areas one is familiar with. Teachers sometimes lose their taste and enthusiasm for the work, and simply go through the routine until they can finally retire. They may teach the same courses year after year,

but at times they fall into the trap of monotonous repetition with little attempt at revision or improvement. In consequence a staleness and stagnation creeps into the teaching, which students easily detect.

Paul wants to see Timothy constantly trying to do better. His words summon the teacher to continue to research what he teaches; to improve the way in which he communicates; to branch out into new fields with which he is unfamiliar, and to make the connections that result from that. Thus Paul says, 'give yourself wholly to them', and the result should be that progress is evident to both students and colleagues. The teacher's desire must surely be that his students have a longing for growth in understanding and usefulness which will continue throughout their lives, but that same longing needs to be demonstrated in his own life first. After all, teachers are learners along with their students; they have not reached the destination any more than their students have. They may be further along the road than those they teach, but still wanting to go forward, and if students see that attitude they are far more likely to catch it for themselves.

Paul ends with a double imperative – the teacher is to watch both life and teaching. For both of them teach; both shape lives; both are vital to the teacher and to the student, and there should be no division between them. The truth he speaks is to be the truth he lives – in humble submission to God's word, with courage and authority, godliness and diligence. Character is more important than anything else in theological education, for it is vital to the students' own lives and to the task they are being prepared for. And it is the life and words of the teacher – intimately and harmoniously united – that are to make the difference.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt far more that could be said on a theme of such importance to theological education – and there are equally many more texts which would richly illuminate the subject further. Nevertheless, each of these four passages helps clarify for us the critical significance that character should have in our practice of theological education. Furthermore, each should provoke us to further reflection, as well as to some serious evaluation of what is taking place in our own lives and in the ministries with which we are associated. May God grant us the wisdom we need to make such valuations central to our programmes.

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Jesus Christ: Our Ancestor?

Timothy Palmer

It is becoming increasingly common in African Christian theology to refer to Jesus as our ancestor. A number of prominent African theologians have referred to Jesus in this way. Yet at the grassroots there is still significant resistance to such a concept. This paper intends to look at the gap between the enthusiastic advocates of ancestor Christology and those opposing it.

Recently, during a course taught at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN), located in Bukuru, Nigeria, 80 students submitted two-page essays on the usefulness of calling Jesus their ancestor in the context of their own ethnic group. The vast majority of these students rejected the idea of Christ as an ancestor in their culture.

This paper will look first at some representatives of ancestor Christology; then the views of some of the respondents will be examined; the paper will conclude with some theological reflections. The purpose of this article is to examine to what extent the theory of ancestor Christology resonates with the "average" Nigerian Christian.

Advocates of Ancestor Christology

The idea of Christ as our ancestor has been proposed by a number of significant African theologians in the last three decades. These theologians have been both Protestant and Catholic.

John Pobee, a Protestant Ghanaian, was one of the first advocates of ancestor Christology. In 1979 he wrote: "Our approach would be to look on Jesus as the Great and Greatest Ancestor–in Akan language *Nana*. With that will go the power and authority to judge the deeds of men, rewarding the good, punishing the evil." Yet, "he is superior to the other ancestors by virtue of being closest to God and as God."[1]

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In the same year, a Catholic theologian, J. Mutiso-Mubinda, wrote an article where he referred to Christ as "our 'Ancestor' par excellence" because of his work of mediation and because he "passed over" to the Father.[2]

Benézét Bujo is a Catholic priest from the Democratic Republic of Congo who did some early thinking on the issue. Charles Nyamiti refers to an article published in French in 1981 by Bujo on the subject.[3] These views were developed a few years later in his *African Theology in its Social Context*. In this book Bujo suggests that we give Jesus the titles of "Ancestor Par Excellence" or "Proto-Ancestor."[4] In this book Bujo uses the theology of ancestors as a starting point for christology and ecclesiology. It is a key doctrine in Bujo's theological system.

In 1983 a Catholic priest from Cameroon, Marc Ntetem, writing originally in German, called Christ "the ancestor *par excellence* . . . . As the ancestor is the true master of initiation, so tribal initiation offers us a point of contact which makes clear . . . that Jesus Christ is the ancestor *par excellence*."[5]

Around the same time, Archbishop Milingo wrote: "Giving Jesus the title of Ancestor is not just giving Him an honorary title. *Jesus fits perfectly into the African understanding of ancestor*."[6]

In 1984 Charles Nyamiti, a Roman Catholic from East Africa, published an entire book on the subject. In his *Christ as our Ancestor*, Nyamiti distinguishes between two types of ancestors in the African tradition: the common parent ancestorship and the brother ancestorship, which occurs "more rarely." It is this latter type that Nyamiti ascribes to Jesus.[7] If Christ is the Brother Ancestor, then God the Father is also our Ancestor, our parent ancestor.[8] But for Nyamiti, "the Redeemer shines forth as THE Brother-Ancestor par excellence, of whom the African ancestors are but faint and poor images."[9]

In the same year, Kwesi Dickson, a Ghanaian from the Methodist tradition, said: "Christ was the perfect victim; by his death he merits, to use an African image, to be looked upon as Ancestor, the greatest of ancestors, who never ceases to be one of the 'living-dead,' because there always will be people alive who *knew* him, whose lives were irreversibly affected by his life and work. . . . The physical cross . . . becomes the symbol of Christ's being *the ever-living*."[10]

In 1986 a Catholic from the Democratic Republic of Congo wrote the article "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," which was later translated from French to English. François Kabasélé wrote: "Christ fits the category of Ancestor because, finally, he is the synthesis of all mediations. . . . For Bantu Christians, Christ performs the role of Ancestor, by the mediation he provides. He is the exemplar, Ancestor, who fulfills in himself the words and deeds of the mediation of our Ancestor."[11]

In 1993 Emmanuel Martey, a Ghanaian Presbyterian, suggests that "Jesus Christ could then be seen by both oppressed African women and men as Liberator and Ancestor. . . . As an ancestor, Christ is still part of the human family. . . . He protects, guards and guides us. It is from Jesus the Christ that we, the whole tribes of God—we *Christians*—have taken our name."[12]

Finally, in 1995, the Ghanaian Protestant theologian, Kwame Bediako summed up his thinking on the issue when he argued that "Christ, by virtue of his Incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into the realm of spirit-power, can rightly be designated, in African terms, as Ancestor, indeed Supreme Ancestor."[13]

In the last thirty years a number of prominent African theologians have written in favor of Christ as our ancestor. But one should note that the opinions have not been unanimous. We will cite only two examples. In 1968 Harry Sawyerr of Sierra Leone, who was sympathetic to traditional African initiation, said that Christ differs from the ancestors because he now lives.[14] Kofi Appiah-Kubi from Ghana, to take another example, calls Christ the Linguist, Savior, Liberator and Healer, but not ancestor.[15]

Nonetheless, since the idea is widespread in academic circles, the question at hand is how this theology resonates at the grassroots. How does the concept of Christ as ancestor resonate with the ordinary African Christian?

A Grassroots Response

In April 2004 I conducted a survey on the issue. The forum was a combined class of 9 Master of Divinity and 71 Bachelor of Divinity students at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria (TCNN). These 80 students were asked to write a two-page essay on whether it is appropriate to speak of Christ as an ancestor in their own culture.

As the results came in, I was struck by the uniqueness of the group of respondents. In this group of 80 students, 42 Nigerian tribes or ethnic groups were represented. The respondents came from a wide spectrum of such ethnic groups stretching from the far northeast of the country down to the southeast and southwest. The majority of respondents came from the wide and diverse Middle Belt of the country, which is significant because this region has a very high number of ethnic groups. But among the group were 8 Igbos and 2 Yorubas plus 6 students from the northeastern state of Borno.

This diverse mix is reflected in the number of Nigerian states represented. Remarkably, 15 of the 36 states of Nigeria were represented. As suggested above, these states were primarily Middle Belt; but there were also 6 Igbo and Yoruba states plus students from Bauchi and Borno states.

Furthermore, it is important that there was a wide range of denominations represented. In all, the students came from 12 significant denominations.

A majority of the students (62) came from the large member denominations of TEKAN (*Tarayyar Ekklesiyoyin Kristi a Nigeria* or the Fellowship of Churches of Christ in Nigeria). These churches are found mostly in the Middle Belt and they are a unique mix, crossing the evangelical-ecumenical divide. The churches represented are: Church of Christ in Nigeria (28), Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (Church of the Brethren, 11), Lutheran Church of Christ in Nigeria (10), United Methodist Church of Nigeria (6), Christian Reformed Church of Nigeria (5), Evangelical Reformed Church of Christ (1) and Reformed Church of Christ in Nigeria (1).

In addition, there were 8 Anglican respondents, 5 Presbyterian Church of Nigeria ones, 2 Baptists, 2 from the Evangelical Church of West Africa and one Christ Apostolic Church man.

Thus the ecclesiastical spread was wide. Absent, however, from the survey were Roman Catholics and African Independent Churches. The Pentecostal churches had only a single representative.

To a large extent, the respondents reflect "grassroots" Nigerian Protestant Christianity. The term "grassroots" is not a precise term but it suggests a link with the common Nigerian Christian. The respondents are

degree students, who are all completing a first degree in theology. But many of them have strong links with the rural, village churches; others have links with urban churches.

The theological tradition of TEKAN and TCNN represents mainline Nigerian Christianity. TCNN and TEKAN are both ecumenical and evangelical. They are not "fundamentalistic" in the narrow sense of the term; instead, they are evangelical in a broader sense. At TCNN there is an openness to moderate African theology; but there is caution toward extreme forms of contextualization.

Since the respondent group comprises a broad spectrum of ethnic and ecclesiastical traditions within Nigeria, we thought that the results of such a survey would be of wider interest.

Results of the Survey

As one reads the 80 essays on this subject, one is struck by the almost universal rejection of the concept of Christ as an ancestor. Only three students thought that Christ should be considered an ancestor in their culture: 2 of the 26 Plateau State respondents were positive to the concept and 1 of the 9 Igbos was positive. But the other 77 respondents were either strongly negative or at least hesitant in respect to this concept. Statistically, less than 4% of the respondents were favorable to the concept; 96% were negative or cautious.

In the light of such an almost universal rejection of the ancestor Christology, one should enquire as to the grounds adduced. The following are some of the most common reasons given.

As a starting point, one should consider the traditional understanding of ancestor in the traditional societies. For most ethnic groups represented, an ancestor is a man who lived to a ripe old age, who died a natural death and who had children. For many of the respondents, Jesus did not meet these three criteria and therefore he is not qualified to be an ancestor.

A Bura man writes: "Christ lived and died without having biological children, so that disqualifies him as an ancestor in Bura culture. He died at the age of 33 years which to Bura people is a tender age, so that proves that his age is not fit for him to be qualified as an ancestor."

A Taroh student said: "Christ is never an ancestor in Taroh land due to the fact that (i) he died a shameful death . . . ; (ii) had no wife nor children (male) . . . ; (iii) he is never a member of any clan in Taroh land . . . ; (iv) had no compound nor history in Taroh land."

A Jukun woman asserts: "A barren person will never become an ancestor . . . . A good ancestor in the Jukun tradition has to give birth to first, second, third and even fourth generations but an ancestor that has no successor up to the third and fourth generation is regarded as a wicked ancestor."

An Igbo man wrote: "Jesus did not give birth to anyone"; an Igbo woman said: "in my culture they have never acclaimed an unmarried man or a childless man an ancestor. So this automatically disqualifies Jesus Christ as an ancestor in my culture"; an Ngwaba man said: "Jesus Christ has no descendants in the manner that African ancestors have"; a Warji person said: "[Jesus] died at a young age and without a wife or child"; a Nupe said: "[an ancestor] must have offspring, a family, a clan or a tribe"; a Kamwe woman maintained that "Jesus has no family and clan"; a Mupun woman saw an "ancestor as one who gave birth to other people"; a Jenjo student claimed that "an ancestor is a man who married with many children, a rich man"; and a Fali person asserted that Jesus "bore no African person (Fali)."

Implied in the above statements is the conviction that there has to be blood relation between Jesus and ourselves for him to be our ancestor. We have to be physically descended from Jesus. He has to be of our tribe and of our clan. But the reality is that Jesus was not African but Jewish. Therefore he cannot be our ancestor.

An Igbo wrote: "he was not born in Abiriba but in Palestine . . . . if he is not born in Abiriba, he is not qualified to be an ancestor"; a Yoruba considered "Jesus Christ as a Jew. He was neither of my tribe nor my family"; an Adamawa student said that "Jesus is no ancestor of the Lunguda man for he bore no Lunguda person"; a Warji person said "Jesus was not Warji by tribe but a Jew."

Related to the above is the question whether Jesus is a Saviour for one particular clan or tribe or for the entire world. An ancestor in the traditional culture relates to that culture; but Jesus is the Saviour of the entire world.

A Mwaghavul man said: "Jesus Christ died to save the whole of mankind while the Mwaghavul ancestor represents only his family lineage; hence Jesus cannot be limited to an ancestor." A Kilba man wrote: "Jesus' death is universal, he is not limited to Kilba people. Thus he cannot be their ancestor." A Chamba person testified: "our tribal ancestors are known among the Chambas only. But Christ is for the whole world." A Jukun man said: "Christ's salvation is universal. He does not represent just a family, clan or nation." A Panso man wrote: "For me to say that Christ is an ancestor is equally reducing Christ to my very culture or clan." An Igbo says that "if Christ should be an ancestor in Igbo land, his atoning sacrifice . . . would be only for his tribe or clan and descendants." An Mbula man asserted: Jesus "is not limited to any family ties. He came for the whole world. But as for ancestors even though it is believed they can protect their own lineage, they cannot protect any other lineage."

The last testimony raises the question of the function of ancestors. Do ancestors bring good or evil? Of course this will differ from tribe to tribe. But some respondents saw a qualitative difference between the role of an ancestor and that of Christ. A Kuteb man said that "an ancestor in Kuteb culture is a deceased head father whose major duty is to revenge on behalf of his children while Jesus Christ is a reconciler who reconciles the Kuteb people to God." A Kilba student said that "an ancestor can infect people with sickness while Christ is a healer." A Dera person testified that "the spirit of the ancestor was feared; today the Dera do not have this fear because they believe in Jesus' death which conquered the spirit of death."

The above raises a more ontological question. What is the ultimate status of an ancestor? A large number of respondents insisted that the ancestors are dead, albeit living dead, while Jesus Christ rose and is alive. A Jukun man says that "the longer an ancestor is in a family, the more he fades away . . . . But Christ himself is God, hence his kingdom remains forever." A Panso student said that "with time the ancestor will be forgotten but Christ can never be forgotten." An Igbo man wrote: "Christ resurrected bodily and remains living, not as living dead." For a Bura man, "it is obvious that Jesus Christ is not in the world of the dead." A Kamwe man said that "Jesus cannot be compared with dead people because he is alive." An Igbo insisted that "an ancestor is a dead progenitor according to my culture but Christ is not dead, he is alive." For a Warji, Jesus "is not a dead person, because he was risen." A Mwaghavul woman said that "when Jesus resurrected, he was seen by many people. But an ancestor only reveals himself at night and only men know who he is. But in the case of Jesus

Christ, even women testified to his resurrection and lordship." For a Jahr student, "the ancestors are dead and none has ever resurrected."   A Mwaghavul man claims that "ancestorship cannot be ascribed to a living being." A Kilba student maintained that "an ancestor has never resurrected physically." An Ndola man said that "ancestors are forefathers who are dead and Christ is God who is living." A Fali man believes that "Jesus is not a living dead but he sat in heaven at the right hand of God." And a Kadung woman claims that "Jesus Christ is not an ancestor because he has been able to conquer death and come back to life."

There is a widespread consensus that Jesus is much stronger than the ancestors. A Ron person said that "ancestors do not have power. . . . They don't really have life to enable them to perform." An Igbo woman wrote that "an ancestor is a deceased human person who is powerless." A Lunguda man said that "ancestors who are mortal cannot be equated with Jesus who is regarded as a living God." A Chamba respondent said that "an ancestor is a human being, not divine as Christ; they die, they need to be saved, they have never resurrected."

Ontologically, Jesus is on a different level than the ancestors. A Taraba student wrote that "in the Munga culture the ancestor stands in the third position in terms of power. We have God, gods or divinities, and the ancestors. Jesus Christ is God." "The Dera see Jesus as the Saviour of mankind who will come and judge the world; they did not see him as an ancestor, whose souls are dangerous to them." A Kulere woman wrote: "Christ is above an ancestor." A Kadung woman asserts that Jesus "ranks above all human ancestors, so he cannot be degraded as an ancestor." A Marghi woman claimed that "Christ is above these and he is above with God, not like the ancestors that still live in this world."

Finally, there was a strong feeling among some respondents that to call Christ an ancestor would be to endorse the cult of the ancestors, which is profoundly wrong. A Plateau woman said that "a candid Christian who is a Kulere should detach himself from ancestral veneration because God and the Mosaic law forbid it." A Chamba man reminded us that "the practice of dead or ancestral things is forbidden" in the Old Testament. A Kamwe man maintains that "the Bible forbids consulting the dead." A Mwaghavul man claims that "the Israelites were warned by Moses not to consult spirits nor to practice divination." Caution should thus be exerted in speaking too freely about Christ as an ancestor.

Theological Evaluation

With a few exceptions, the consensus of this diverse group of respondents is that Christ does not qualify to be our ancestor. Jesus did not die naturally at an old age; he did not have a wife or children; he is not from an African clan or tribe; he is not dead but is living; his power far surpasses that of the ancestors.

The grassroots response that we have considered suggests that in actuality Christ is *not* an "Ancestor par excellence." With all due respect to Archbishop Milingo and François Kabasélé, Jesus does *not* fit "perfectly into the African understanding of ancestor." There are too many fundamental differences between Christ and the ancestor.

A key difference is the fact that the ancestors are dead, but Christ is living. Back in 1968 Harry Sawyerr said: "Unlike the ancestral dead of the Africans, Jesus Christ, once dead, *now lives.*"[16]

This survey cannot be viewed as final or definitive. Not all of the respondents have a deep knowledge of their traditional religion. Since the responses are "grass-roots," most of them do not have the skills of a trained anthropologist. But the students do hold a deep-seated conviction that for them in their situation Christ cannot be called an ancestor.

In short, there is an incredible gap between the "ivory-tower" scholarship of some of the academic professors and the experience of African students who are close to the "grassroots." The theology of Christ as an ancestor does not resonate with most of these respondents.

Contextualization is good; it is necessary. The Gospel must be related and incarnated in every culture. But care must be taken so that the contextualization is indeed relevant to the needs of the people at the grassroots. I would like to suggest that ancestor Christology causes too much confusion and does not meet the pastoral needs of the average Nigerian Christian.

End Notes

[1] John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), p. 94.

[2] J. Mutiso-Mubinda, "Anthropology and the Paschal Mystery," in *Spearhead*, No. 59 (Eldoret: Gaba, 1979), p. 52; cited by Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: Mambo Press, 1984), pp. 9-11.

[3] Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as our Ancestor*, pp. 7-11.

[4] Benézét Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context*, trans. John O'Donohue (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1992), p. 79.

[5] Marc Ntetem, "Initiation, Traditional and Christian," in *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, rev. ed., ed. J. Parratt (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 102. See response by Tersur Aben, "Ntetem on the Ancestorship of Christ," *TCNN Research Bulletin* 38 (August 2002): 32-38.

[6] E. Milingo, *The World in Between* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), p. 78 (emphasis added); cited by E. Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 85.

[7] Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor*, p. 15-17.

[8] Ibid., pp. 63-65.

[9] Ibid., p. 70.

[10] Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984), pp. 197-98.

[11] François Kabasélé, "Christ as Ancestor and Elder Brother," in *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, ed. Robert Schreiter (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), pp. 123-24.

[12] Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), p. 85.

[13] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), p. 217.

[14] Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), p. 93.

[15] Kofi Appiah-Kubi, "Jesus Christ–Some Christological Aspects from African Perspectives," in *African Dilemma: A Cry for Life* (EATWOT, 1992), pp. 58-73.

[16] Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism*, p. 93.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas J. Oden

How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity

Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007. 204 pp, hb, $19.00

Amid growing global interest in African Christianity, Thomas Oden's latest book must surely now take center stage. Oden sets forth the stirring thesis that the early Christian thought and theology which proved formative for the development of early Christianity and Christian culture elsewhere was distinctively African. The common perception is that Christianity in Africa is a relatively recent arrival from the West. Oden asserts the opposite: African Christianity is ancient, and the predominate theological processes of early Christianity were not north to south, but south to north, from Africa rather than to Africa. The support provided for this thesis is not so much an argument as it is an outline of an argument, one which Oden calls on African scholars to make and substantiate by extensive research into the early African origins of Christianity.

Oden's interests in early African Christianity emerged out of his work over much of the past fifteen years as series editor of the twenty-eight volume *Ancient Commentary on Scripture*. Oden states that he and the other editors "were astonished to find such a large percentage of texts from Africa or influenced by African writers among the patristic comments on verse after verse of Scripture" (45). The title and thrust of the book reflects Oden's sense, solidified through years of working in primary texts, of the profound extent to which writers on the African continent played a decisive role in shaping fundamental features of Christian thought and theology

If the title of the book properly reflects Oden's thesis, the subtitle is slightly misleading for two reasons: First, it may create the impression

that early African Christianity was the seedbed only for Western Christianity. But it is important to highlight also the extent to which early African Christian thought proved formative not merely for Western Christianity but perhaps even more so for Eastern Christianity, within which devotion to the early Church Fathers has been unstinting. Oden would not dispute this, but it is worth noting since Oden focuses principally on the influence of early African Christianity in the West. Second, the subtitle may suggest to some that the primary aim of the book is to reconnect Western Christians with their theological roots in Africa. Oden certainly has more than a few things to say to Western readers dismissive of any intellectual tradition originating in Africa, but Oden's principal intended audience is the multitude of African Christians who, he believes, must now lead the way. He is thus tireless in repeating his call for an entire generation of scholars in Africa to do the hard textual, linguistic, and archaeological work necessary to reclaim early African Christian theology as the foundation for African intellectual identity.

There are at least three features of Oden's skeletal argument that are especially worth noting. First, Oden highlights seven ways in which he believes early African Christianity influenced Christianity especially in the West: the Western idea of the University, exegesis of Scripture, dogmatics, conciliar patterns of ecumenical decision-making, monasticism, neo-platonism, and rhetoric. However, though Oden takes special pains to demonstrate the influence of early African Christianity on key features of Western Christianity and culture, it is also clear that Oden believes that something more fundamental is at stake. For Oden, the way in which Christianity was articulated on the African continent in the post-apostolic period is so foundational that it is not merely possible to find its traces in Western Christianity but rather also to find within early African Christianity the resources for a new ecumenism. "If asked to confess what is that sort of theology I most confidently name as my own, I could just as confidently turn to the generic term _African orthodoxy_ as to _Antiochene, Roman, Byzantine_ or _evangelical_"(130). So convinced is Oden of the integrity of the early African witness to the apostolic faith that he can see evidence already of a new "African ecumenism." "Whether from Catholic, Protestant, Coptic or charismatic perceptions, believers are growing ready to listen to the uniting voices of classical consensual African Christianity. It is amazing to see the new energies that are

emerging out of this uniting work of the Spirit—the vital communities of prayer, scholarship, preaching, teaching and discipleship" (p. 108).

Second, Oden makes the striking observation that the lengthy and unbroken history of Christianity on the continent means that it, as much as any other religion, deserves to be regarded as an African traditional religion. The tendency of many to make oral tradition an indispensable feature of traditional religion is prejudicial, given the lengthy legacy of the great written traditions of Christianity and Islam on the continent. While this may seem to many African Christians to place Christianity in rather strange and unwelcome company, Oden sees only gain. Many African theologians have sought ways of rooting Christianity in traditional religions as a way of demonstrating how an ostensibly foreign faith may be conceived as authentically African. But if Christianity *is* an African traditional religion rather than a late, cumbersome import, then African Christians need look no farther than the rich heritage of early African Christianity to discover what it means for Christianity to be truly African.

Third, though Oden is by no means anti-Pentecostal, it is clear that he is sees the predominant form of African Christianity as rife with risk. "The rising charismatic and Pentecostal energies in Africa are stronger emotively than intellectually. They may not sufficiently sustain African Christians through the Islamic challenge unless fortified by rigorous apologetics." (p. 99). One might add here also the challenge of the onslaught of Western popular culture and intellectual influence. For Oden the intellectual resources necessary for African Christians to meet the challenges of contemporary Christianity are available in abundance within early African Christianity.

Perhaps the biggest objection to Oden's thesis is the widely perceived distinction between North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. To sustain his thesis that the early development of Christianity along the Nile basin and in the Maghreb is an "unreceived gift" to all African Christians, Oden seeks to demonstrate the unity between sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa. One significant hurdle for Oden is the question of both ancient and modern identity. Just as many in modern North Africa do not think of themselves primarily as Africans, neither is it clear that early Christians in North Africa thought of themselves as "Africans". Oden is aware that in the early centuries of the Common Era the term "Africa" was the name of

a Roman province, roughly comprising an area from modern-day Algeria to Tunisia. To the extent that the geographically amorphous region stretching southward down the Nile was known, it was not called "Africa" but "Nubia" (by the Romans), "Ethiopia" (by Greek speakers) or "Cush" (by the Egyptians and Hebrews). However, for Oden, the unity of Africa rests simply on the singularity of Africa as a continent. Whether or not Augustine and Athanasius used the term "African" of themselves, their creative energies were nurtured on soil now known as Africa.

Here some questions remain. Oden's geographic argument for the unity of Africa butts up against a geographic absolute – the Sahara. The Sahara proved a far more imposing barrier than did the Mediterranean, breached only by the corridor of the Nile valley. As a result, the linguistic, political, cultural and religious affinity of N. Africa has always been with regions to the north and east. Further, it is not entirely obvious that a shared geography alone is a sufficient basis to assert a unified intellectual tradition. Geographically, Eurasia is a single continent, without anything like the internal barrier created by the Sahara, but would it make sense to suppose that Eurasians belong to the same intellectual or cultural or religious tradition?

Oden speaks often of *Western* Christianity. But "the West" is a conceptual construct made up of geographically remote societies which nevertheless have common cultural values and a shared history. At the same time, societies which are geographically proximate to Western countries are nevertheless remote in relation to the cultural values and histories which bind societies together. This is simply to recognize the fact that the ties that bind are much more complex than mere geography. Geography, it seems, may be a rather weak tie in comparison to the extraordinarily strong bonds which shared history, religion and culture can create.

And yet it is precisely for this reason that Oden deserves to be heard. Oden is aware of the danger of a reactionary Afrocentrism which embraces the work of the African fathers simply because it is African. To do this would undermine the catholicity of Christian faith and the convictions of the early African fathers. Thus, ultimately, Oden's call for Africans to rediscover their heritage in the African fathers lies in his conviction that the African fathers were faithful witnesses to apostolic truth. If Oden

believes early African Christianity must be given priority after centuries of neglect, his purpose is to provoke a corrective action which puts things back in proportion (p. 91). The early African fathers are to be valued by all Christians for their "accurate attestation of the truth, not the egalitarian goal of making all voices equal" (p. 92). Oden finds little reason to hope that Western Christianity, under the influence of post-modern moral relativism, has the resources needed keep its ecumenical promises. Rather, Oden's great hope is that young African Christian scholars will lead the global church in a rediscovery of early African Christianity and, in doing so, will demonstrate the way in which the apostolic truth preserved in early African orthodoxy enables God's people everywhere to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." If non-African witnesses to the truth prove also to be essential for this task, one can nevertheless embrace Oden's optimism that African scholars will once more shape the Christian mind.

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Alister McGrath

Doubt in Perspective: God is Bigger Than You Think

Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006. 142 pages. Price

Alister McGrath's *Doubt in Perspective* is an encouraging book for all who struggle to trust God completely or to accept the doctrine of the Christian faith. The book's main theme is clear: Doubt is an invitation to grow in faith and understanding, rather than something we need to panic about or get preoccupied with. Generally Christians are reluctant to admit that they have any doubts. As McGrath says, 'Doubt is a subject many Christians find both difficult and sensitive. They may see it as something shameful and disloyal, on the same level as heresy.' He sees doubt as pointing to a faith which is built on weak foundations or a relationship

with God which has in some way been neglected but also as an opportunity for spiritual growth.

McGrath begins his examination of doubt by defining what doubt is, and isn't, before demonstrating that a search for certainty is actually a futile exercise. He then discusses how doubt is present in other world-views, with particular reference to atheism. His short chapter on the personal aspects of doubt leads naturally into a discussion of doubt in the Bible. This is followed by four chapters looking at specific doubts people may have and the book concludes with two chapters which help readers to put their doubts in perspective and to view doubt in a positive light.

McGrath identifies two kinds of doubt: intellectual and personal. He suggests that someone can have intellectual doubts related to the Christian faith or can have doubts related to God or Jesus Christ because of their experiences of life or what they read in the Bible. In regard to intellectual doubt, he shows how post-modernity, being a world-view which fosters doubt and cynicism, can cause people to doubt the validity of Christianity and whether it will survive for much longer. He also addresses the reality that many people in such a culture are reluctant to accept the gospel, which is very discouraging for those who are presenting the gospel to them. McGrath helpfully tackles these problems by taking us back to the Bible and by powerfully showing the efficacy of Christianity and the God who brought it into being.

The approach of this book is helpful because it takes doubt seriously and in fact suggests that it is understandable at times, given the culture we live in and the experiences we have in life. However, he does not condone doubt. Instead he sees it as a symptom that our understanding of God or ourselves needs some attention. Doubt is often a sign that we have neglected our relationship with God. He does not accept that it is helpful to become preoccupied with doubt, seeing such preoccupation as pointless and something which causes faith to stagnate. Instead having doubt is an opportunity to nourish our faith so that we can grow spiritually. McGrath does more than simply discuss this in a theoretical way but also gives suggestions of how we can confront doubt and what positive steps we can take to grow closer to God.

He takes a pastoral approach, showing his understanding of why people have doubts and what can be done to address these doubts. He offers his solutions to the problem of doubt as suggestions the reader might find helpful rather than taking a 'how to overcome doubt' approach and he uses examples of people who are struggling with doubt to illustrate a way through for his reader. He frequently cites biblical examples which help us to put doubt in perspective. His discussion of the Israelites' experience of doubt during their years in the wilderness and the disciples doubts after Jesus' crucifixion engender helpful insights which demonstrate that doubt can develop because of our inability to see the whole picture. His use of the parable of the sower to demonstrate that the problem is not with the seed, the gospel, but the healthiness of the soil in which it is sown. From this he offers suggestions on to how to make sure the soil of your life is healthy enough for God's message to take root and grow strong.

McGrath's book brings doubt into the open, discouraging us from suppressing it and thus becoming personally preoccupied with it. It show the importance of doubt in indicating the condition of our spiritual health and that when viewed positively gives opportunity for spiritual growth. Doubt, he argues, can stimulate us to strengthen the foundation of our relationship with God and rediscover the depth of our faith.

Doubt in Perspective is both intellectually challenging and pastorally encouraging. It would be of benefit to those who are encountering doubt themselves as well as being useful for those counselling people struggling with doubt. It demonstrates the sufficiency of the gospel and the greatness of God while at the same time taking seriously the genuine doubts Christians experience. This book is a refreshing change from the plethora of books which urge us to 'just believe' and will surely be a help to many.

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Arthur W. Hunt III
The Vanishing Word: the Veneration of Visual Imagery in the Postmodern World
Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Books, 2003.
272 pages, ISBN 1-58134 – 404 -X

The author of *The Vanishing Word*, Arthur W Hunt III, is a PhD holder in Communication from the University of Southern Mississippi and has been actively involved in Christian Education for more than seventeen years when he authored this book. His academic training includes both Speech and Mass Media communication; his articles have been featured in the *Christian Research Journal.*

In this book, Dr. Hunt III, shows that in the American culture images have taken the first priority over the written Word. He states that most people spend many hours watching television rather than read a good book. In chapter one, for example, he writes, "Although our communication technologies dazzle us, they also have the potential to unravel us and to make us a bewitched people." (p.19) He shows as an example that the Orlando society serves as an emblematic gauge of an image driven public, dependant upon movies, television, and video games. He shows that the theme of Orlando's theme park is primarily a reflection of the film industry.

The culture of the Americans like the rest of the world has an insatiable appetite for visual stimulation. America has had an ongoing love affair with technology. Virtual reality is deemed good because it represents progress. Technology has the propensity to change our beliefs and behavior. He continues to argue that for every expressed purpose a technology is designed to serve, there are always a number of unintended consequences accompanying it. He shows that while the society through its culture is dependent on images and visual imagery the Judeo-Christian heritage was supposed to be characterized by being word-dependent rather than image-

dependent. This is evident through church history as seen in the word-based movements like the protestant reformation, Puritanism, and the beginnings of the American experiment. *The Vanishing Word* advances the proposition that our image-saturated culture is at the risk of being preyed upon by a tyrant in waiting.

Dr. Hunt III suggests several remedies to deal with our idolatrous predicament in the rest chapters of his book. Firstly, he says that there exists a longstanding and irreconcilable tension between the Word and the image. Secondly, that pagan idolatry is Biblicism's chief competitor because one thrives in the absence of the written Word and the other cannot exist without it. Thirdly, that America was born out of a print-oriented culture. The press invented by a German by the name Johann Gutenberg had completely changed or brought about a great change in society. It had ushered in movements like the Protestant reformation, Puritanism, and the American experience. Quoting Johann Gutenberg he reiterates, "Yes it is a press from which shall soon flow, an inexhaustible streams of pure truth, like a new star it shall scatter darkness of ignorance and cause a light heretofore unknown to shine amongst men" (p.77). And this had become prophetic for the dark ages were called "dark" because they lacked the necessary information systems conducive to democracy, namely, literacy, a printing press for serious public discourse, a passionate desire to deliberate, and the freedom to exercise all the above. America was born at the moment she possessed all these features while at the same time being plugged into an agreed directive of biblical moral virtue derived from the Word.

Fourthly, that there is the fact of the big shift with something in the air. He describes that this period was an age not only of significant technological upheaval but also of cultural upheaval. Their values, practices, and artifacts, which are remarkably interrelated, were affected greatly. A nation that was born in a revival of religion and became a great Christian nation was swallowed up in selfishness – a self-gratification became the norm. America, which thrived in the rural, turned urban where their values changed. The entertainment industry exploded in the 20th century and altered the leisure time habits; Americans now spend more time entertaining themselves than they do working or sleeping.

Fifthly, that while middle class Americans hardly ever ventures into the seedy section of the big city anymore, the red-light district has now been

conveniently piped directly into the living room. He recounts the rise of modern media from the telegraph to the computer with a special focus on the leisure habits of Americans during the twentieth century.

Sixthly, the images-dominating components of today's media content: sex, violence, and celebrity worship conform to a pagan ideal. He says that Paul's epistle to the Christians at Rome is perhaps the most perceptive critique of human nature ever written. In the epistle's opening discourse, the apostle exposes the crux of humanity's turning away from God, what we may call the deliberate refashioning of the creator into the creature. He describes a pagan as someone who has engaged in a substitution process for suppressing the true God. He concludes by saying that our association with electronic images helps us sustain a certain way of life and a certain way of looking at the world while we run away from God.

Seventhly, on being post modern, the Americans are turning from rationality, and at the same time an embracing of spectacle. In this process, doctrine is watered down either from neglect or more likely from willingness to compromise biblical truth to attract a following. He shows that the modern mind has a remarkable ability to hold at the same time two ideas that logically contrast each other. That is why he says it is difficult to define postmodernism because the cultural sands are still shifting beneath our feet.

In chapter eight, the author gives a formula which he calls Furhrer. This can be understood to mean the fulcrum from which things are moved. He shows that a dangerous soup was cooking due to challenges that face human kind. He gives an example of Adolf Hitler and others who in his time developed a rejection for the Jews. This ultimately became to a larger scope the rejection of the transcendent God and His laws. Another example was that of Chalmagne, whom the author says that through his crown, orb and scepter unified Europe well over a thousand years earlier. The author shows the formula these two men used during their times and were completely different from the American experience. He shows that America was at a crossroad and choosing the right road could have made all the difference.

Finally, he talks about making values saying that if we know what lies behind a particular medium, we are able to point out how it works and why it sways people the way it does, and then we can lessen its power over us.

He offers some remedies for our idolatrous predicaments starting with the individual, the home, church, and finally the school. He shows that these solutions would form the strongest assault against the triumph of idolatry of accomplished cumulatively. The Christian is to walk by faith based upon the revealed Word, while parents control life under the roof of their home. The church must return to the Word as their final authority and practice it as the school resists the idolization process of the pagan cultures.

Dr. Hunt III sees this trend, as a direct assault on Christianity for people will spend many hours on visual imagery and lack time for Biblical teaching, which counteracts pagan influence in the society. He argues rightly that the media has propelled sex, violence, and celebrity worship into the limelight of our culture leading into pagan worship rather than the true worship of God. For this cause, the church must take this warning seriously otherwise it will be cut off from its Word-based heritage. The society is open to abuse by those who exploit the image and neglect the Word. Any thoughtful reader will find *The Vanishing Word* a challenging call to be critical about images bombarding our senses through the media and to affirm that the written Word of God is everything.

The Vanishing Word is a book that hits the African media problems head on as well for if the American culture has problems with the written Word because of images then the African cultures have the same or even deeper ones. Because of technology, what happens in America today will definitely find its way to Africa in a few days if not hours. *The Vanishing Word* has a direct challenge for Africa today. The book is very relevant in addressing the imagery versus the written Word needs in Africa. It is fit as a textbook for courses in both Communication and Christian Education considering the challenges that face the African church and Christian ministry. The book is also necessary for pastors who have a task in educating the church on the effects of media on the society. If the church is going to be effective in teaching the Word to its adherents, then the remedies given in this book can be useful for the pulpit and teaching ministry of the local church.

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J.P. Moreland and Klaus Issler

In Search of a Confident Faith: Overcoming Barriers to Trusting in God

Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008.
ISBN 978-1-84474-327-8. 230 Pages

Questioning the nature of Christian faith is something rare, and makes an extraordinary hard demand on anyone who is familiar with Christianity. It is true that what is meant by Christianity is only very vaguely understood. A faith that evades to questioning understanding is not real faith. J.P Moreland and Klaus Issler, as long term educationists, are in agreement that, "The nature of faith is clouded so much in misunderstanding in our culture that it is difficult to grasp what faith really is and how it is related to knowledge and reason" (p.16). This volume is a simple yet powerful invitation to an adventure in understanding the Christian faith. In attempting to answer the question about the nature of the Christian faith, the book is clear in its sense of genuineness, openness, honesty, and expectancy.

In Search of a Confident Faith clarifies the meaning of the term faith from a biblical perspective. This meets the need caused by the confusion that prevails in our world today about faith. It is a demonstration of the real essence of biblical faith and how one accesses confidence in God and His truth. Its relevance is reflected in its practicality and the prescriptive measures it suggests on how one can grow in faith. As a means and a tool to increase one's confidence in God, this work shows that Christian faith is concerned precisely with this real life of ours in today's world. The profoundness of the book lies with its combination of both intellectual and emotional strands, which to most people are barriers to faith. These two have been weaved together creatively.

In the first section of the book, the meaning of faith and importance of faith to God is tackled. It does so by discussing three aspects of faith: classical faith, theological and philosophical aspects of faith. Faith as confidence, trust and reliance belong to synonymous class. Faith as knowledge, commitment, and assent belong to the category of theological triad. The three philosophical aspects are degrees of belief, confidence in and confidence that, and changing beliefs. The major thrust of the book is that, "Merely exhorting people to be more committed to God – 'just have more faith' – seldom produce greater confidence and dedicated trust in God. Rather, what is needed is a realistic picture of a flourishing life lived deeply in tune with God's kingdom. . ." (p. 22). The rationale that points us to the necessity of the faith include, the hiddenness of God, faith as the foundation of life and flourishing in the presence of others.

Part one which comprises three chapters explores more about intellectual doubts and emotional barriers to faith. Part two which also contains other three chapters focuses on increasing our expectations of God and building a case for how our God-confidence can grow. This section of the book looks at Jesus' teaching about faith and some New Testament promises that believers need to examine. Moreland and Klaus offer four fundamental points about biblical God-confidence as far as the New Testament is concerned. The first is that biblical God-confidence is belief in Jesus Christ. Second, that our minds can be transformed by God to match Jesus' view of reality. Third, that faith without deeds is dead. God-confidence will affect how we live. Fourth, God-confidence can be strengthened; it can grow. The authors did well to buttress all the points with scripture passages. The strength of the book lies in its proposal of mind renewal which in turn will influence our worldview. The last section of the book provides some contemporary examples and case studies that can help us increase our God-confidence to rely on what Jesus teaches about faith. The final stretch tackles one practical arena in which we can grow in our confidence in God, making life decisions as we seek God's guidance.

It is a book that challenges real doubts as far as faith is concerned. It is alright to doubt but even better to seek ways to adequately deal with doubts of faith. "There are critical moments in our journey in trusting God when we need to step out just like Peter into an

experienced realm, taking God's Word and promises as the 'real' representation of reality" (p.105). The strength of the book lies in its simple, easy to read style and the centrality of scripture in presenting its point of view. Faith, by its very nature, encompasses our intellect, emotions and our daily living. Proposals suggested for personal growth in God-confidence can easily be implemented. Though it addresses challenges in the Western context, the truth implied is universal. It is a book that can truly develop a biblical worldview in anyone who reads it with the seriousness it deserves. Moreland and Issler have not just put forth propositional truth but have also offered deep reflection of their personal commitment to God. They are witnessing to an experienced reality. I strongly suggest it as a text book for spiritual formation.

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