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general theological discussion in Africa has fixed upon the former element, on making Christianity authentically African. It is a worthy and necessary task, as Kato himself emphasized. But if African Christianity is not to lose its function as salt in the world, not to say its very soul, it must also direct unremitting attention to its rootage in the biblical traditions. So African theologians have asserted. The terms therefore in which the fundamental questions of contemporary African Christian thinking are posed demand a continuously nurtured orientation not only upon the query "Is it African?" but also upon the query "Is it Christian?" Yet in actual practice the debate has not accorded equal time to these two nodal questions.

Pitfalls in fact represents the first sustained effort in Africa to raise and pursue the latter question, through a systematic critique of contemporary African Christian thinking from the standpoint of biblical teaching. Whatever else one might wish to say, it is in this regard a ground-breaking work. It would be a pity therefore if general Christian thinking in Africa merely fixed upon flaws in *Pitfalls*. For *Pitfalls* represents a new direction in the theological debate, and, whatever the flaws, stands as a pioneering attempt in a critically necessary task for all true African Christian thinking. *Pitfalls* remains Kato's spirited challenge to African Christianity to move from theological complacency to theological responsibility and alertness, in the quest for a Christianity that is "truly African and truly biblical".

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Threats and Dangers in the Theological Task in Africa

Tite Tienou

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This article is a chapter in Tite Tienou's forthcoming booklet, The Theological Task of the Church in Africa, to be published by Africa Christian Press early this year. The Rev. Tite Tienou is a pastor with Eglise de L'Alliance, a Christian and Missionary Alliance-related church in Upper Volta, and the Executive Secretary of the Theological Commission of the Association of Evangelicals of Africa and Madagascar. He is a graduate of Nyack College, New York, the Faculte Libre de Theologie Evangelique, Vaux-sur-Seine, France and is at present on study leave to complete his Ph.D. at Fuller Seminary. This perceptive and important base for understanding the issues in evangelical theology in Africa was first given as a series of lectures at the ECWA Theological Seminary, Igbaja, Nigeria. The booklet will be sold in evangelical bookshops throughout Africa and will be available in the UK from Africa Christian Press, 20 Bedford Road, South Woodford, London E18 2AQ, and in Australia from Emu Book

Agencies Ltd., 3 Richmond Road, Flemington, N.S.W. 2140. Orders from other countries should be addressed to Africa Christian Press, P.O. Box 30, Achimota, Ghana
(Editor)

It would appear, as Dr. Kato repeatedly warned, that the major problem of Christianity in Africa is a theological one. A Church without a theology, or with a weak understanding of God and His Word, stands on quicksand. And yet African evangelicals, while they perceive the danger, seem so reluctant to engage in real theological work. Is it because some missionaries and mission boards have been too successful in inoculating their African converts with their virus of mistrust and fear of theology? Perhaps so. But there are other dangers and threats to an evangelical theological task. Let me cite only a few: mistrust of theology, sacerdotalism, an ahistorical faith and denominational individualism.

These are largely dangers from within evangelicalism. One could also point to threats from the outside such as syncretism, secularism, ecumenism, universalism and pluralism. But since evangelical leaders persistently warn against dangers from the outside such as these, I do not think it wise to spend time just now on them. This is not at all to minimise their importance! I do believe, however, that if we want to make progress in our evangelical theological task, we must have the courage honestly to examine our own internal problems and bring out appropriate solutions. Too long we have seen the straw in the other man's eye without taking out the beam in ours first!

MISTRUST OF THEOLOGY

Some evangelicals claim to have no theology but the Word of God. Theologians, they say, complicate God! In those circles the 'spiritual' thing to do is to hold to the pure and simple Gospel—as if the Gospel was that simple! To be sure the Gospel is clear enough for a child to understand it; and our Lord did say that those things were hidden to the wise but revealed to the children. But, at the same time, the Gospel is 'so deep, so difficult and so complicated' that even Nicodemus, the teacher of Israel, could not understand it. What can we make of this? To me, it indicates that salvation, spirituality and the Christian life do not depend on the use or non-use of our intellect. It is not a question of 'do we use our brain?'; it is 'how do we use our brain?' I do not wish to open the old debate of faith and reason, but let me say this: *submission* to the Lord is the key to right Christian living. *Submitted* to His Lord, Peter, the Galilean fisherman, became a powerful instrument for the proclamation of the Gospel! *Submitted* to His Lord, Paul, the well-trained rabbi, contributed much to Christian theology! The history of the Church is full of such examples.

I realise that my argument can hardly convince those evangelicals who have a visceral mistrust of theology. When we study the history of theology and the nature of theological work, we may wonder if, after all, they are not right! For the history of theology is not full of certitudes. Here are what Karl Barth thinks are threats to theology: solitude, doubt and temptation.¹ If, then, all theologians can do is doubt, fight and disagree, theology is not worth trusting! So the argument goes. The burden of proof, then, is on those engaged in theological work. The sure way to make people trust in theology is for theologians to show real submission to Christ and obedience to His Word. This is what evangelical theologians must do in Africa. In so doing, let them reflect on what Pascal wrote. This man, even though

¹ Barth, Karl, *Evangelical Theology*, trans. Grover Foley (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1964), pp.96–128.

he claimed the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and not the God of philosophers and scholars, had this to say about the use of reason in religion:

Submission and the use of reason, this is what true Christianity consists of ... If we submit everything to reason, our religion will have nothing mysterious and supernatural. If we offend the principles of reason, our religion will be absurd and ridiculous.²

I think that if this advice had been followed, theology would not be where it is today.

SACERDOTALISM

Ideally and biblically, theology should not be reserved for an élite. Theology is the task of the whole Church. We, who are heirs of the RefOrmation, believe this, for we confess the universal priesthood of all believers. When theology lacks its ecclesiological dimensions, when the Church fails to act as a controlling force on theology, then we are all in trouble. The danger of ivory tower theology is greater in sacerdotalism; where a distinct class of people shapes Church life by the formulation of doctrine and the celebration of religion.

One of the Characteristics of African traditional religion is the celebration of life. Because of this, no African is truly a-religious. For how will he take part in the celebrations of life's events? The religious specialist consequently holds a very important place in African life. And sacerdotalism has, therefore, a strong appeal for the African. There are, of course, many other reasons why sacerdotalism appeals to man in general and to the African in particular: the mysterious, the show, minimal personal commitment, etc. But the celebration aspect, which gives one a sense of belonging and identity, is certainly what appeals most to Africans.

The consequence of this aspect of traditional religion is that much of Christianity in Africa is sacerdotal—evangelicalism included. In evangelical sacerdotalism, the pastor leads and whatever he says the people follow, often without criticism. Dr. R. T. France makes the same point when he writes:

The church as a whole ... has got to learn to think biblically for the African context. Evangelicals who make much of biblical authority are too often ruled in practice, in Africa as in the West, by theological and behavioural conventions which they would be hard put to it to defend biblically. We are used to following, not to thinking issues through for ourselves; so no wonder we do not make the running.³

Sacerdotalism conditions man to trust the specialist (priest, pastor, spiritual leader) first before he trusts God and His Word! African evangelicals cannot 'make the running' in theology because some people must take orders from their 'patriarchs' before they say anything. Clearly then, the problem of Christianity in Africa is not only a lack of sound theology, it is also and foremost a faulty foundational theology of the church. The success of the so-called independent churches, with their patriarchs and prophets, proves, if need be, that sacerdotalism is here to stay. A little *charisma* is all one needs in order to win adherents!

Since evangelicalism is not free from this faulty foundational theology, we must rid ourselves of it. We must, therefore, hold to the *sola Scriptura* in word and in deed. We must

² Pascal, Blaise, *Les Pensees* (Librairie Generale Francaise, 1972), Nos. 268, 273, pp.132, 133. My own free translation.

³ France, Dick, "Christianity on the March", *Third Way*, 3 November 1977, p.4.

also put into effect what the Reformers understood by the universal priesthood of believers. This does not mean, however, that we should do away with all clergy or that we reject the specialist's contribution. It means that, because the church is also involved in the theological task, we should welcome the observations and criticisms of any member of the church and of the church taken collectively. But for the church effectively to control theology, its members must be like those of Berea who examined the Scriptures every day to see if Paul's preaching was in accordance with God's Word or not ([Acts 17:11](#)). Evangelical Christians must love God's Word enough to know it, and when they know it they will defend and confirm it. If the Theological Commission, or theologians, become too distant from the churches, how can they theologise together? Let evangelical theologians always listen to the evangelical *vox populi*; let the evangelical *vox populi* always make itself heard; and let this interaction produce a theology to the glory of our God!

AN AHISTORICAL FAITH

The third danger for evangelical theology in Africa is a lack of proper historical perspective: faith becomes ahistorical and this can lead to all kinds of distortions and misconceptions. If sacerdotalism enslaves man to man and to tradition, the lack of historical perspective imprisons man in superficial faith. Speaking of American evangelicals, Bernard Ramm deplores the fact that the majority is deficient in historical knowledge. He continues by saying:

They lack a sense of the course of theological history which is their heritage. They believe what they are taught here-and-now and have no awareness of the there-and-before. To hold evangelical faith without a minimal knowledge of its history is theologically unhealthy if not precarious ... A number of fundamentalists and evangelicals have deserted the camp because, lacking any real historical knowledge of their heritage, they did not see their heritage in its proper light, nor did they have an appropriate vantage point from which to assess the alternative view to which they capitulated. *An evangelical who holds an ahistorical faith has no real sense of the theological and spiritual continuity of his faith.*⁴

Even though we cannot expect the 'average' Christian (what a terrible adjective!) to be well-read in history, he must still have a minimal knowledge of it and, above all, a proper perspective. He must fully grasp the fact that, starting with God's self-disclosure in Scripture, the Christian faith has been, is, and will be, solidly grounded in history. He must not think that Christianity began when the Gospel was first brought to his people. He must be aware of the fact that there have been twenty centuries of Christian life and thought before our time. The distinctive Judeo-Christian contribution to God's dealing with men is that revelation is historical and that this historical revelation is the eternal counsel of God. Many religions do not depend so much on history. You can be a devout traditional religionist in Africa without any reference to history; participation in the vital force of experience with the sacred is what counts. Similarly you can be a good Muslim without paying much attention to history; the important thing is belief in Allah and his prophet and the keeping of Islamic religious observance. Not so with Christianity! Our God is the Lord of history and our faith is an historical one.

⁴ Ramm, Bernard L., *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1973), pp.14–5. Italics in original.

If the Christian cannot ignore history without serious consequences for his faith, what about the theologian or the church leader? It is evident that a church leader or theologian who has an insufficient knowledge of history can be terribly provincial and rigid in his outlook. Consequently he cannot develop a theology which will be of great service to the wider Church. Unfortunately a great many evangelical leaders in Africa lack an understanding of theological history. The teaching of some of them seems to imply that there was a gap from the time the canon of Scripture was closed until their denomination 'was raised up by God'; or that what has gone before was but 'keeping the truth captive'! 'Where was the Protestant Church before the Reformation?' can be an embarrassing question to many a leader.

The alternative for evangelicals is to study the history of theology and Christian thought in order to avoid the mistakes of the past and thus sharpen our tools for theological work. We must also give due weight to the progressive nature of biblical revelation.

DENOMINATIONAL INDIVIDUALISM

The fourth major danger is denominational individualism. I am thinking here more particularly of the denominations which pride themselves on being 'evangelical'. Evangelical unity in Africa is somewhat ambiguous. Is this what Dr. Kato felt when, after rejecting the positions of 'unity in the dark' and 'no unity needed', he recommended 'true unity in diversity' in these words:

Realizing that people have different tastes including those relative to the type of church worship and the form of church government, evangelicals do not see the need of abolishing church denominations. Unity in diversity is also strength. The local church or denomination should not have to fear domination from the outside. For African evangelicals, the most desirable alternative is membership in the Evangelical Fellowship of each country and also membership in the African Evangelical Association. Such fellowship seeks to unite Christians in each country in fellowship and service, and then also unites all Bible-believing Christians in Africa.⁵

He seems to be cautious not to define what he means by service. But we need to include in 'service' the area of theology because this is one of the greatest needs and because church life cannot be separated from theology. But theology is the most difficult area for cooperation; this is where most differences come from; this is where our interests are at stake; this is where our individualism is made manifest. We need to go beyond the general agreement to work together. We need to establish principles of co-operation which will give us unity while respecting the individual identities of people and churches.

But one factor continually hampers our attempts to work together: the policies of some mission societies. There is a striking similarity between the foreign aid policy of developed countries toward developing ones and the policies of some mission boards operating in Africa. Much of foreign aid is done with strings attached: The receiving country must, for instance, with the money it receives buy goods from the donating country only. This ensures that the interests of those who give are secured. The same happens in church-mission relationship. When missions support programmes, they make sure that their distinctives are

⁵ Kato, Byang H., *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975), p.170.

kept. Some will not even participate in any endeavour where only *one* of their particulars is missing!

Of course, we have a good word for this; we call it stewardship! But stewardship is taken too far when it divides the body of Christ and prevents it from being effective. The theological task facing evangelicals in Africa is very complicated because by money-power missions and denominations seek to foster their own brands of theology. When will the time come when we can carry out our programmes without having to take orders from the outside? Mission boards must understand that if they want to contribute to the success of evangelicalism in Africa they must give without undue burden to African churches.

Here I must add a word concerning the moratorium. The frustration of what I briefly described as standard human and mission practice seems to be what led to the Lusaka call for a moratorium. This is what we read in the Report:

We must therefore choose a policy of moratorium, by refusing to receive funds and personnel; this being the best means of giving to the African Church the power to accomplish its mission in the African context; to guide our governments and peoples to find solutions to their economic and social dependence ... (This is) the only efficient means of realizing our identity and staying a respected member of the universal church.⁶

This frustration is shared by African evangelicals. While a moratorium will hardly solve the problem, we must all recognise the legitimacy of the churches' yearning for identity and self-respect. Nobody likes to be a perpetual child! Furthermore we need to explore the moratorium in conjunction with ecclesiology and the theology of missions.

But, perhaps the spirit of fundamentalism is too much with us. Perhaps we are too busy reacting instead of seeking better to prepare for the theological task facing us. This is how Erickson describes the spirit of fundamentalism:

Because fundamentalism found itself under attack, it developed a defensive mentality. A harsh and uncharitable spirit came to predominate ... Within its own ranks, internal suspicion and bickering over minor points of doctrine increased ... From a movement of genuine scholarship, positive statement, and a certain latitude of evangelical position, fundamentalism came to be increasingly a negative, defensive, and reactionary movement with a narrowing of its theological options and an evaporation of scholarship and literary productivity.⁷

The task before us is so monumental that we cannot, we just cannot, afford to keep on 'bickering over minor points of doctrine'. We also face opposition from those who are not evangelicals. This is what we read in the Lusaka Message to the *Churches of the AACC*:

Before we can realize in Africa what God expects of us, before we can become a society which lives fully and exclusively for others, we call on the Churches of Africa to allow Christ to free them from:

⁶ *La Lutte Continue*, Rapport Officiel de la Troisieme Assemblee de la CETA, Lusaka, Zambia, 12–24 Mai 1974 (Nairobi, Kenya: 1975), p.55. My own free translation.

⁷ Erickson, Millard, *The New Evangelical Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1968), pp.28–9.

1. Theological conservatism in order that we may understand, interpret, apply and live the message of the Gospel in a new light ...⁸

Note that the first thing they want to be freed from is theological conservatism. They will do everything they can to keep evangelicals from making progress. This is no time for internal fights!

In spite of all this, there are many opportunities for evangelicals in Africa today. We must not be discouraged, for our situation is similar to Paul's when he was at Ephesus: Adversaries are numerous but there is a great open door ([1 Corinthians 16:8, 9](#)).

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Is Rome Changing?: An Evangelical Assessment of Recent Catholic Theology

W. A. Dyrness

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When a young Augustinian monk moved out of the monastery and into our home a few years ago, the small Protestant denomination was quick to claim he was a convert. But the truth was more complex and less edifying. He had become confused in the Catholic Church; he no longer knew who or what to believe in, and he left in search of a haven of unargued certainties. He was a graphic illustration of the turmoil within the Catholic Church. If ever it were possible to think of the Catholic Church as an unchanging and monolithic institution, the events of the last fifteen years have certainly made such a view impossible. The purpose of this paper is to make some attempt at assessing these changes from an evangelical point of view. In order to get our bearings, let us try to put the present tensions in historical perspective.

That "Rome never changes" was not only the opinion of those outside the Church, but up until the end of the nineteenth century it was the proud boast of Rome herself. The Reformation had given the Church a fear of change and it was not until John Henry Newman that any serious attention was given to development. In 1845 Newman published his famous "Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine". He insisted that genuine development was not only inevitable as different people reflect on the truth, but that it was positively advantageous in order to make truth available for all peoples and times. He pointed out that the Bible itself was written on the principle of development. A primary element in his discussion was that favourite nineteenth century conception that history progresses organically. The evolution that occurs—it would seem—is not in the truth, but in our

⁸ *La Lutte Continue*, op. cit., p.14. My own free translation.