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living.*

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6. Historical churches cannot overlook the areas of need, such as solid Bible teaching in most independent churches. Change comes slowly, but through a meaningful dialogue both groups can learn and minister to each other.

CONCLUSION

From these churches may spring the renewal that will bring Africa into evangelicalism. On the other hand, it might swing the other way. As **P.242** long as mission churches ignore these independents, they may be curtailing a solid growth process much needed in the harvest. As it is now, as long as the historical churches steer away from the independent churches and refuse to communicate the gospel in cultural patterns understood by the Africans, there will be a growing number of churches that could swing either way, to the evangelical or to some other position.

It may well be that missionaries and national Christians must allow these churches to find their own level of worship. The mission churches may have to learn to tolerate what appears to be contrary to the way Christianity was introduced by the Western missionaries and test them on the true Spirit of Christ and not on the Western spirit of culture.

There is every possibility that these 6,000-plus churches could become a mainspring for the future of African Christianity. But if they are pushed off, isolated, and left alone with no continuity with other church groups and missions, they may move into an indigenous form of old worship that will probably have no semblance of Christianity.

Mission churches should reach out to these independent churches to fellowship with and to show them the love of Christ. Historical churches must prove their viability and make the gospel appear intelligible, while demonstrating its message in life and action.

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The Church and its Theology

Tite Tienou

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This summary of a message given at the General Assembly of AEAM held in Malawi in 1981 speaks of the importance of Biblical theology for the African Church.

INTRODUCTION—DEFINITION

It is more than appropriate to devote this General Assembly to the Church and its varied ministries in our continent. Although some may think of the Church as a dispensable institution, we are properly concerned with building and nurturing Christ's Church and enabling her to carry out her ministry in the world with due honour and glory to her Lord! This is, must always be, our highest concern because it is the Lord's!

In the Church's life, worship and ministry, theology is essential, if not primary. But the kind of theology I am advocating should not be confused with the speculations and sterile debates that are current in theological circles. Rather it is theology as an integral part of the Christian ministry with the purpose of 'perfecting the saints ... edifying the body of Christ' ([Eph. 4:12](#)). Theology is therefore knowing God in order to serve Him. For

'Theology as the disciplined ... reflection/action of knowing God is never theology if it is less than functional, carrying out God's plan through His people in His world'

(Conn 1977:106).¹

The Church's theological task in Africa today is to develop a functional theology which is faithful to God's revealed Word. Without such theology the Church becomes anaemic and may be paralysed.²

My purpose in this brief paper is not to pontificate a theology for us but rather to explore some of the obstacles which need to be overcome before we can develop a truly functional Evangelical theology (no! Evangelical *theologies*) in Africa. Central to the entire endeavour is the matter of hermeneutics which will be treated in the second part. [p. 244](#)

OBSTACLES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY IN AFRICA

I have elsewhere explored some of the internal dangers facing Evangelical theology in Africa. I will not burden you by repeating the same here but let me simply summarize my thinking and attempt to sharpen our focus. There are basically four problem areas which cause Evangelical theology to be at a standstill in Africa at the present time: (1) Mistrust of theology (2) Sacerdotalism (3) An ahistorical faith and (4) Denominational individualism.

By mistrust of Theology I mean a lack of confidence in theology based on the assumption that theologians inspire more doubt than trust in God and His word. This is expressed by the claim to have no other theology than the pure and simple Word of God.

By sacerdotalism I mean a trust in the religious specialist to the point that what he says can be thought more important than doctrinal formulations or even the Bible.

By an ahistorical faith I mean a lack of awareness of the history of the Christian Church or doctrine. We tend to think that we owe no one anything (theologically and doctrinally speaking). We are insufficiently aware of the 'great clouds of witnesses' who have gone before us and also of the present enriching diversity in Evangelism.

By denominational individualism I mean a sense of self-righteousness which causes us to think that we alone have the true faith. Consequently, cooperation in the theological task is one of the most difficult to achieve in Africa today. We do not want to be contaminated by someone else's doctrines.

These four factors combined with outside ones can ruin the theology of the Church. First, we should recognise that theology is for the whole Church, not just a chosen *elite*. Secondly, theology is concerned with communicating meaning so that Christians may be

¹ Conn, Harvie M. 'Contextualisation: Where Do we Begin?' in *Evangelicals and Liberation* 1977 C. E. Armerding, ed; (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House).

² Schoonhoven, E. Jansen *Exchange* No. 25 (Special issue on the Bible in Africa) 1980.

mature in Christ. Thirdly, the meaning of God's word is obtained by appropriate hermeneutics.

THE WHOLE CHURCH IS CALLED TO THEOLOGY

Theology as knowing God through a better understanding of His word cannot be reserved for the specially trained only. Indeed the whole church when she is obedient to God practices theology. I know that since the 1973 General Assembly we have in the AEAM, placed more emphasis on higher training for the ministry. This is a welcome necessity; but we must not think that a greater number of highly trained professionals is going to be the guarantee for sound Evangelical theology in Africa. Theology is always in and of the Church. Singularly **P. 245** that means that the Bible should be known, understood and practised in our churches. It should not be just a book of reference! The Word of God will exercise its rightful control on our theology when we focus on sense (meaning) rather than sound (form).

THEOLOGY IS COMMUNICATING SENSE TOWARD MATURITY

It is commonplace to deplore the superficiality of African Christianity and the lack of maturity of many of our Christians. May I suggest that the reason is partially because we tend to focus on *sound* more than *sense*? Let me explain what I mean. We tend to be preoccupied with the proper stating of doctrines rather than the meanings those doctrines convey to our Christians. This explains the disparity between what we say we believe and what we actually practice.

Likewise in our teaching, both in church and in our theological institutions, we tend to satisfy ourselves with the knowledge of the proper information, the proper contents of the Bible. But we often miss the all-important factor: the meaning. We should not therefore be surprised that we have built a hollow Christianity, a Christianity of meaningless words! Sense, not sound, must be our theological aim. The understanding of the intended sense of scripture will go a long way toward the maturity of our people.

HERMENEUTICS IS THE KEY TO SENSE

Before one attempts to communicate sense or meaning, the meaning must first be discovered. Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of God's Word revealed in the Bible so that the message and purposes intended by God are understood by our contemporaries as they should have been by the first hearers or readers. Hermeneutics is therefore much more than an academic exercise; it is at the heart of the process of communicating the Gospel. This is why many, like B. Jansen Schoonhoven, feel that hermeneutics is going to be the key issue in the Evangelical-Ecumenical debate for the coming years in Africa (1980:45). Evangelical theologians need to sharpen their hermeneutical tools.

Hermeneutics being a complex issue, it cannot be properly treated here. The focus of hermeneutics for us is not, however, the philosophical discourse so prevalent in so much of the writing on the subject. Rather, it is on the question: how does one's interpretation preserve the normative character of Scripture in theology? Such hermeneutics will constantly ask the two questions singled out by Harvie Conn as basic to a contextual ministry: **p. 246**

'How are the divine demands of the gospel of the Kingdom communicated in cultural thought forms meaningful to the real issues and needs of the person and his society in that

point of cultural time? How shall the man of God, a member of the body of Christ and the fellowship of the spirit, respond meaningfully and with integrity to the Scripture so that he may live a full-orbed kingdom life-style in covenant obedience with the covenant community?' (1977:104).

Hermeneutics, like theology, is therefore the task of the entire people of God, not just the specialist. It is a process which should provide a better understanding of Scripture thereby resulting in fruitful theologizing. No one method of interpretation can be set *a priori* as the Evangelical method. Biblical revelation is a multi-faceted word demanding multi-faceted methods in order to get the proper meaning. Here, as always in theology, the whole church must constantly question and challenge if need be, the findings of the specialist.

CONCLUSION

Evangelical theology is at a crossroads in Africa today. Left to its present situation it can develop monstrous heresies because of its lack of grappling with the pressing issues. The Bible, at the present a closed book for many, when properly understood is the sure way of rectifying the present mistakes!

Theology, having as its aim the maturing of all God's children, is not a luxury for us. It is a necessity! Theology is the foundation of the Church's life and ministry because it is the communication of knowing God. Theology will help build the Church if the whole Church reflects on God's word in a discipleship posture.

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The Homogeneous Unit Principle—A Revaluation

Koinonia, or fellowship, is an essential element of the nature of the Christian Church. It cannot be isolated from the vertical dimension of Latreia, worship. The issues of Koinonia are complex. For example, how would you react, as an educated, well-dressed, middle class Christian, when a dirty, uncouth, evil-smelling villager came and sat next to you in your Sunday morning worship? To take an actual but typical case from India: what did the high caste Brahmin converts do when the low caste untouchables flooded the church spilling out through the door? They literally jumped out through the church windows! Thus, in spite of Jesus' high priestly prayer, 'that they all may be one', the tension between the universal communion of saints and the identity of a local congregation remains unsolved. One answer in recent times has been the Homogeneous Unit Principle (HUP) of the Church Growth movement.

A colloquium on the HUP was held under the auspices of the Lausanne Theology and Education Group, from May 31 to June 2, 1977, in Pasadena, California. Five faculty members of the Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Mission prepared advance papers on the