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Contextualizing the Structure of Systematic Theology in Africa

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I Another Frontier in Contextualization

Most theological educators in Africa accept the need to contextualize the content of theology when training their students. Dorothy and Earle Bowen, followed by Ugandan Elie Buconyori, pioneered the contextualization of educational methods in theological education in Africa. Richard Seed provided further depth in this area more recently.¹ This essay suggests that contextualizing the structure of sys-

tematic theology in Africa is also needed in theological training.

Timothy Tennent, as part of an essay on the emerging contours of global theology that includes advocating the reintegration of biblical/exegetical, systematic, historical and practical theology, concludes that different cultures reason and process information so differently from the West that

We cannot, therefore, assume that the way systematic theology has been traditionally structured and presented throughout the history of Western civilization is the most logical, the most effective, or the only way in which theology can be systematically structured for the larger global context.²

This essay intends to be at least as radical as Tennent who believes:

- 'that every church in the world needs a systematic introduction to biblical themes that will best help and guide them in formulat-

¹ Dorothy N. and Earle A. Bowen, 'Theological Education and Learning Styles in Africa', *Theological News* Vol. 18, No. 1 Jan-Mar (1986), 5-8. Elie A. Buconyori, *Cognitive Styles and Development of Reasoning among Younger African Students in Christian Higher Education* (EdD thesis; Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1991). Richard E. Seed, *The Relationship Between Goals of Theological Education and Learning Practices* (PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 2007).

² Timothy Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 253.

ing ethical, cultural, and practical applications of theology’.

- ‘No single systematic theology can be held up as universally adequate for all Christians’,
- ‘Theological textbooks must become more contextually sensitive without losing sight of the grand universal themes that unite all Christians through time and space’.³

In a personal communication, Dr. Tennent defines the ‘grand universal themes that unite all Christians through time and space’ as,

the great unfolding *missio dei* which stretches from creation to fall to covenant to incarnation to cross and resurrection to Pentecost to Return of Christ and finally to the New Creation. That grand narrative is the superstructure or meta-narrative [out] of which all theology (however it is organized or arranged) must ultimately flow. The wonderful confessional evidence is that whether Africans or Chinese or Americans are reading the Bible, they may organize it quite differently, but we don’t have substantial disagreements about the meta-narrative structure of the grand story itself.⁴

Tennent’s book goes on to discuss with approval veteran SIM missionary Wilbur O’Donovan’s *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* as a model of a systematic theology which not only

includes traditional western theological categories, but also explores many issues that are relevant for ministry in Africa.⁵ This essay suggests a more radical departure from traditional western categories for systematic theology than O’Donovan’s.

II Powerless Theology

The type of re-structuring that I suggest could be considered a form of the reintegration of the theological disciplines as suggested by Tennent. The main advantage to contextualising the structure of theology would be that it helps students to connect more closely important theological concepts with real ministry needs. The following story illustrates what happens when African pastors fail to integrate important theological concepts into their pastoral ministry.

The small mission-founded church congregation in south-eastern Nigeria meets in a member’s front room on the first Sunday of the new year. They stand to repeat in unison their denomination’s doctrinal statement of faith. The ceremony reaffirms the people’s commitment to the doctrines brought by the first European missionaries and reinforced through the catechism taught to each child who becomes a baptised church member.

Under cover of darkness that same Sunday night in another rural part of the state, an elder in the same denomination makes his way to a diviner’s house. He has never done this before

3 All three quotes come from Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 258.

4 Personal email to the author dated, 10 June 2010.

5 Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, 258.

and he does not like doing it now, but his only son is very sick. Constant prayer and numerous trips to the mission hospital have failed. Repeated efforts to name and claim his son's healing as a television evangelist preached also failed. Even several trips to a charismatic prayer house have brought no improvement. The elder knows that in consulting a traditional diviner he is being disloyal to Christ and that his church will discipline him if he is caught. They will accuse him of backsliding into paganism. That is why he comes 'Nicodemusly'—at night as the Pharisee and Sanhedrin member Nicodemus did when he talked with Jesus about being born again (John 3:1-21).

But the elder does not think of himself as turning his back on Christianity. He is simply looking for someone with the power to heal his son—the son who represents his continuing family line, a culturally compelling form of personal immortality. He does not know what else to do or where else to turn because the doctrinal statements that he too recited this morning do not tell him how to act like a Christian in this situation. Advice from his sympathetic pastor was no help. Trust God, remain firm in the faith, keep praying and accept God's will, whatever it might be. The elder was afraid that God's will in this case was death for his son. To simply accept that his son's death was the will of God was too hard for him without trying all the sources of power available in his worldview. So he sneaks off to the diviner's house and slips inside.

My point is not that Christianity in Africa is a mile wide and an inch deep. Anyone who knows African Christians

knows that the African church has more than her share of heroes of the faith who make many western Christians look as shallow as the over generalization found in the previous sentence. My point is that the elder's pastor probably feels as powerless as the elder and for the same reason. After years of schooling in the western theological tradition, he simply does not have a convincing answer to his elder's problem. He knows rule number one—in this fallen world people die, even the only sons of normally faithful elders. He knows rule number two—pastors, even pastors who walk closely with God, cannot change rule number one. But if his western based theology has no power to change the rules, it also has too little power to help his elder deal with his son's sickness and impending death in a Christian as well as an African way.

When we approach the pastoral problem faced by the African elder and his pastor in terms of the relationships involved in their operational world views, we can analyse the problem beyond its surface issues, or presenting problems. As Hiebert notes, 'we must master the skill of human exegesis as well as biblical exegesis to meaningfully communicate the gospel in human contexts'.⁶ At heart what causes the elder to go knowingly astray is not his son's sickness, the quality of his loyalty to Christ or even the belief (or desperate hope) that the diviner can help solve the problem. The core issue is the elder's 'unconverted'

⁶ Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 12.

view of his own personal immortality.

The sick child is his son, his only son. Sons are essential to an African man's sense of personal immortality. African Traditional Religion is focused on this life, and a man's sense of personal immortality is found in continuing the family line, and not simply for sentimental reasons; continuing his family line is his familial responsibility. 'Do you want your family line to end with you?' is the rhetorical question from family that urges a man to settle down, marry and have children, especially sons. It is the question that relatives pose when his wife is not producing children, especially sons, as they suggest polygamy as the traditional, rational solution. A man lives on in the memory of his descendants.

It is hard for Westerners to grasp the power of that component in the traditional African worldview. Many African Christians continue to operate with that and many other aspects of the traditional worldview alongside their Christianity.⁷ Those non-Christian aspects of the traditional worldview that have not yet been 'converted' are a serious challenge to the African church. This approach sees conversion as an ongoing process rather than a one-time decision. Although another name for this process is 'sanctification', conversion highlights the turn from the old ATR way of thinking to the new Christian way of thinking.

Romans 12:1-2 sees the same process and calls it being 'transformed by the renewing of your mind'.⁸

III The Power of Contextualized Theology

But traditional Christianity has a large 'next life' emphasis, and it is this component that would enable the elder to leave his son's earthly fate in God's hands. From the orthodox, evangelical Christian point of view, the elder's hope of personal immortality is not wrapped up in his son's earthly survival. It is wrapped up in God's Son who defeated death and rose from the grave and who lives today. Because he lives, the Christian also has the hope of eternal life—not the bodiless existence of the Greek-inspired western version of heaven, but the biblical vision of the new heavens and the new earth with its lions and lambs, its children playing in safety, its incorruptible, spiritual body that experiences a life of eternal and perfect relationships with God and others. The Christian heaven is the true fulfilment and replacement for the ATR 'village of the dead'. It also replaces the continuation of the family line as the ultimate form of personal immortality. As good as continuing the family line is, the promise of eternal life is the ultimate fulfilment of that hope.

The pastor's job is not to falsely promise that the elder's son will recover or to offer the powerless counsel of 'Pray, trust God, and accept whatever

⁷ See Yusufu Turaki, 'Evangelical missiology from Africa: strengths and weaknesses' in William D. Taylor, ed., *Global Missiology for the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 281 for an example of this common idea.

⁸ See Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 28.

God decides'. The pastor's job is to preach, teach and demonstrate that it is not only this life that matters (and it does matter), but that, for the Christian, it ends, not in the silence of the grave, but in the joy of heaven. The destiny of every Christian is personal immortality within a heavenly Christian community where there is no more death, sorrow, and pain. Whenever he dies and his son dies, the elder will one day see his Christian son again, and it is the power of this truth that enables him to turn away from the diviner's door.

Other questions of causality and power in the spiritual realm, especially in terms of healing, and other issues surrounding marriage and family also need deeper analysis than pastoral students often get in their Bible college classrooms.

Paul Hiebert (a Protestant) and Peter Gichure (a Roman Catholic) argue for the need to deal with local, non-western Christian situations in a new way, using 'missional theology' and 'contextual theology' respectively. Gichure illuminates the historical changes that have taken place in Roman Catholic theology. Hiebert describes the limitations in western theology that are the inevitable result of doing theology in a particular time and culture.⁹ Let us hasten to say that the problem is not with western theology as such. After all, why should we expect western theology, developed

and refined over centuries in response to changing conditions and worldviews in Europe and the Americas, to satisfy all the needs in cultures with very different conditions and worldviews? The theology is not at fault, but the way that theology is now organized and the way it is usually presented are not helpful enough for many African pastors to make easy use of theological truths in many ministry situations.

Nor should we blame the early missionaries for bringing a form of Christianity that was uniquely their own. What other form did they have? None. Christianity and Christian theology do not exist apart from culture. All forms of Christianity and all forms of Christian theology are culturally specific. When the early western missionaries brought the gospel to Africa, the modern notions of anthropology, multiculturalism and missiology had not yet been invented. The wonder is not that western missionaries brought western theology, culture and commerce, but that Africans came to Christ in such huge numbers and so relatively quickly in spite of this. One African Christian laywoman, grateful for missionaries and their efforts, told me that the problem was not that missionary theology was wrong, it's that it was incomplete. 'African theologians are agreed that Christian theology in Africa stands in need of a new approach, a new method, that will not be determined by "white" or "European" presuppositions.'¹⁰

⁹ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 39-44. Peter I. Gichure, *Contextual Theology: Its Meaning, Scope and Urgency* (Nairobi: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, 2008), 25-58.

¹⁰ John Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity: African Theology Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 194. See also Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 11.

IV Bible Translation and Contextualization

One important reason for Christianity's popularity in Africa is that many of the early missionaries followed the centuries old tradition of translating the Bible into vernacular languages.¹¹ As they learned African languages they quickly saw that they had to deal with African cultures. Christianity became a religion of the heart in Africa because Africans of many different ethnic groups could say along with the audience on the day of Pentecost, 'We hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues' (Acts 2:11). One gets the feeling that even if missionaries had limited themselves to Bible translation, Christianity would be at least as firmly established in Africa as it now is, though perhaps in very different forms.

Translating western theology textbooks is widely acknowledged to be no final answer. The fact that pastoral and theological education in Africa is usually conducted in western languages, especially English, rather than Africa's many vernaculars may be one major reason why our pastor could not help his elder with his situation. The Bible is translatable and when properly translated it bears in embryonic form the seeds of a home grown theology. So far written (as opposed to oral) theology in African mother tongues is still largely stillborn¹² though the recent

translation of the Africa Bible Commentary into Kiswahili is a hopeful sign. Other mother tongue theological expression is going on elsewhere.¹³

In contrast with very low-level Bible schools, secondary level and tertiary level pastoral education in Africa's theological schools will not take place in Africa's vernacular languages until there are written mother tongue theologies. When this occurs, will not such home grown theological textbooks benefit from, even require, substantial changes in their table of contents to deal with African pastoral issues? For example, would a biblical theology of ancestors fall under biblical anthropology, or personal eschatology? Where would you place a discussion of what the bible says about clapping hands in church? Is there a place within the western structure of systematic theology that could deal with whether or not bringing a dead body into the church building as part of the funeral rites is desecrating the house of the Lord? These are all pastoral issues I have had to deal with in response to various tensions in mission-founded churches.

Revising the western structure of the systematic theology taught in Africa's Bible colleges seems inevitable. Perhaps the greatest danger in teaching western systematic theology in Africa is that the traditional focus on abstraction and rational

11 See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 1989 for a full discussion of the impact of Bible translations.

12 Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 17.

13 Miriam Adeney, 'The Weakest Feature in Our Work' in *Global Missiology*, April 2006, <http://www.globalmissiology.org/english/archive/adeney_weakest_featur...> accessed 2 Aug 2010.

coherence has often turned teaching it into an intellectual exercise remote from the African Christian's everyday issues.¹⁴ It is not that the western eschatology the African pastor learned was wrong. In agreement with biblical tradition, that theology taught that God's people will inherit a new heavens and a new earth when Jesus returned. But the pastor never learned how to connect that truth to the everyday choices and issues he and his church faced because he was never shown how to do that, nor was he taught that he needed to do it. The systematic theology he inherited did not help him in his hour of need when his elder came to him for help in healing his sick son. This is because the way theological truth was structured isolated it from the real life ministry situation that the pastor faced. Reintegrating theological truths with pastoral ministry seems the obvious solution, as Tennent advocates, but that means dismantling the western structure in favour of one that is able to directly connect biblical truths with African pastoral issues.

V NT Writers Contextualise Theology

The New Testament writers also taught theology without being dependent on a western systematic structure. Instead we see the NT writers, including Paul, creating theology as they dealt with actual issues and situations in the church's life. 'Any study of the Pauline epistles must begin with

the fact that Paul was writing to real life situations.'¹⁵ The New Testament letters are examples of theology at its best, applied to specific issues that churches and their leaders encountered in their ministries and on-going relationships.

Modern theologians tell us that all theology is occasional—it grows out of real pastors facing real pastoral occasions in their church ministry.¹⁶ Why should theologians working in Africa not bring biblical truth to bear on pastoral issues in imitation of the New Testament? It seems that the most practical and relevant approach to teaching theology in Africa starts with the pastoral issues of concern to church members today as illustrated by the story that is near the beginning of this essay. Eventually an indigenous system of theology will develop out of this interaction of biblical truth and vernacular pastoral issues.

VI Life-Transforming Theological Structure

If we dismantle the traditional structure of western systematic theology in order to focus on pastoral issues, we

¹⁴ Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 41.

¹⁵ Brian Wintle, 'Doing Theology in Context: A Biblical Case Study', in Sunand Sumithra, ed., *Doing Theology in Context* (Bangalore, India: Theological Book Trust, 1992), 13.

¹⁶ Tite Tienou, *The Theological Task of the Churches in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1990), 50, 'good theology always arises out of emergency situations'. See also Samuel Ngewa, Mark Shaw, Tite Tienou, eds., *Issues in African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1998), 3-11, and Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 10.

still need some kind of framework in which to teach theology in Africa today. I will develop an example of what this framework could look like by adapting Andrew Walls' indigenizing and pilgrim principles in church history¹⁷ to restructuring the framework of theology in Africa. The indigenising principle links Christians with the particulars of their culture and ethnic group while the pilgrim principle reminds them that in this life they have no abiding city, and that loyalty to Christ will sometimes put them out of step with their culture and ethnic group.

Walls' indigenising principle assumes that God accepts us into his family as we are, with all our social relationships, both functional and dysfunctional, while his pilgrim principle rests on the fact that God accepts us as we are in order to transform us into what he wants us to be, namely Christ-like. Therefore Christians must learn how to function in their own culture without becoming so immersed in it that the transformation towards Christlikeness is halted and reversed.

The indigenising and pilgrim principles are in tension, not in opposition or balance. According to Walls, 'We need not fear getting too much of one or the other, only too little.'¹⁸ He points out two dangers of having no tension. First, when a church so indigenises the Christian faith that it cannot be challenged by it (when there is no pilgrim principle at work), then Christianity is turned into mere civil religion. Second,

when a church focuses on 'a set of requirements and inhibitions that arise from the Christian history of another community' (when there is no indigenising principle at work), then it has fallen into sectarianism.¹⁹ The pilgrim principle is a force that tends to universalise the vision of the church, while the indigenising principle tends to localise it.²⁰ These could therefore be referred to as universalising forces and localising forces.

The necessary tension between these two principles in church history is analogous to the tension inherent in Jesus' prayer for his followers where he knows that they will have to remain in the world after he ascends to his father's presence, but that at the same time they also are not of the world any more than he is (John 17:13-22). To maintain a healthy tension of being in the world (not disconnected from it, but immersed in it) but also not of the world (not having a worldly nature controlling them, but living in the light of the gospel), Jesus' followers need truth to guide them. They need theological truths that are not only true (heaven is real), but also relevant and powerful enough (therefore the death of your believing son is not the end of his existence or of yours) to encourage believers to take a difficult step of faith that leads them beyond their traditional world view towards a Christian world view.

17 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 7-9.

18 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 54.

19 Personal e-mail from Prof. Walls to A. Wildsmith, 12 August, 1998.

20 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 53-54.

VII Individual Building Blocks

In terms of theology for pastoral education, the most important cornerstone, the most important universalizing force, is the Bible. In particular, it is the story of salvation from creation to re-creation that hinges on the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the gospel story that ushers in the beginning of the re-creation that will be consummated at Jesus' second coming. This meta-narrative underlies the individual examples of Paul's theologizing in his letters, and it is the basis for our own theologizing today.²¹ African scholars from many traditions point to Scripture as the most important source for doing theology in Africa today, even if they disagree on how it should be used, and come up with widely differing theological conclusions.²²

Evangelicals take the Bible as the Word of God written under the inspiration, but not dictation, of the Holy Spirit by chosen people who employed their own words and literary styles (2

Peter 1:21 and 2 Tim. 3:16).²³ The Bible shows us God's point of view on relationships between human beings and God, and amongst human beings themselves. It can be thought of as God's 'case book' on how to conduct (and how not to conduct) relationships. When we interpret and apply it carefully, it gives us a divine perspective on the life of faith in every context.

From the evangelical perspective, the Bible is our primary resource and our ultimate authority for evaluating any theology. It therefore is the force that provides the universalizing tension in constructing theologies for a particular culture. It is also a localizing force because its divinely inspired and authoritative test cases for relationships are always played out in specific historical and cultural contexts. As God gives his judgments on these specific cases in specific times and cultures (David is wrong to seduce Bathsheba and arrange her husband's death), we learn how to apply those lessons to our own times and cultures, either directly or indirectly.

It is the Bible's specific cases that make it a localizing force and its divine inspiration and authority that make it our premier universalising force. The story of salvation provides the overall theological context within which African pastoral students at the diploma and degree level, as field-dependent learners,²⁴ can place the ele-

²¹ Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: Apollos IVP, 2005), 95-96, 117.

²² For examples, see John Pobee, 'The Sources of African Theology' in John Parrat, ed., *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (New Edition) (London: SPCK, 1997), 25; Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz, *The Bible in a World Context* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), viii; and the very presence of books such as Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, *The Bible in Africa* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) and Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²³ See for example, Wilbur O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in African Perspective* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 26.

²⁴ See endnote 1 above regarding the Bowens' and Buconyori's work on learning styles.

ments of theology they use to deal with the pastoral issues they will face.

The second universalizing 'force' at work in constructing any local theology is the Holy Spirit because he lives in believers, yet also calls us away from the attitudes of the world towards Christlikeness. The Spirit can guide believers as they construct theology and any successful attempt will agree with biblical revelation.

Perhaps the most important localizing forces are the pastoral issues confronting Christians in Africa. Specific issues grow out of the context within which African theology is done. The editors of *Issues in Christian Theology* illustrate this context by describing the three worlds of Mumo, a representative Bible college student: *the world of Christian faith, the world of African culture, and the world of modern culture*.²⁵ These worlds or contexts are the sources of the various pastoral issues African pastors encounter as they minister.

The first context or source is *the world of Christian faith*, the Church. African believers may have grown up with theologies through Protestant, Catholic, Pentecostal or Orthodox churches or missions agencies or the various Africa Initiated Churches. Pastoral ministries students do not come to a training institution as empty vessels, but they come with their inherited beliefs and practices. As they learn more about the faith as it is expressed in their own tradition, they should also be made aware of the expressions of

faith other Christians have developed.

The worldwide church has already developed many theological traditions that can also be mined for solutions to various African issues. These historical traditions are also under the authority of Scripture in evangelical theology. Church traditions, including the practice and theology of those traditions, provide Africans with examples of how other Christians have contextualized their Christianity, but cannot serve as infallible models to follow.

The second context or source is *the world of African culture*, or African Traditional Religion. Many pastoral issues, especially issues of identity, arise out of Africa's religious past. Andrew Walls, referring to the main preoccupation of African theologians in the 1960s and 1970s, says, 'All are wrestling with a theological question, the prime one on the African Christian's intellectual agenda: who am I? What is my relation as an African Christian to Africa's past?'²⁶ My own research over the past twenty five years indicates that many aspects of African worldviews continue to exercise a powerful influence in the lives of believers today, often without them being consciously aware of the fact.²⁷ The story of the desperate church elder with the sick son is a case in point.

The third context or source is *the world of modern culture* which also includes aspects of post-modern cul-

²⁶ Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 13.

²⁷ Andrew Wildsmith, *Pastoral Issues in the Annang, Ibibio And Igbo Sections of the Qua Iboe Church of Nigeria*, an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1998.

²⁵ Ngewa, Shaw, Tienou, eds., 'Introduction: The Three Worlds of Mumo' in *Issues in African Christian Theology*, xi-xiv.

ture. Many important pastoral and theological issues arise, as Pobee mentions above, 'in the flux and turmoil of our time'. Some of them can be found, for example, in Wilbur O'Donovan's, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*.²⁸

Professor Jesse Mugambi is passionately concerned that African Christianity engages in the social reconstruction of Africa, ridding the continent of its many social ills through the application of Reconstruction Theology.²⁹ A great many church members have definite opinions on the question of whether or not ordained ministers should run for political office, but the relationship of Christianity and the state goes far beyond this particular topic. The role of the church in response to ethnic conflict in Rwanda and Kenya and the recurring civil strife between Muslims and Christians in central Nigeria are among the burning issues that need to be addressed in church pulpits and Bible College classrooms.

VIII A New African Theological Structure

Teaching the story of salvation is the theological core, the foundation of pastoral education, the theological grid through which students view African pastoral issues. This story is in tension with the worlds or contexts that give rise to the pastoral issues. If this dis-

cussion puts into place the building blocks for a new structure of systematic theology for teaching African pastoral students today, then what sort of new structure could possibly replace the existing western structure of theology proper, bibliology, christology, ecclesiology and so on?

Anyone who has attempted to deal with this issue probably finds that it is a struggle to come up with a structure that facilitates the integration of theological truths with students' daily life and the lives of their members. The following framework for theology courses was developed in the context of our college's curriculum review several years ago. Both missionary and Kenyan faculty were involved and it took the combined efforts of all of us to develop a different structure. Ultimately, that structure was not implemented because of changes in personnel.

A contextualized African theological structure could be based on the pastoral issues that deal with living relationships rather than a series of abstract concepts divorced from ministry situations. Relationships are very important in Africa and Christianity. Esther Kibor independently notes that Christian educator Friedrich Froebel's 'goal for education is stated in terms of a relationship with God'.³⁰ It does not seem a big jump to a new theological structure based on relationships. After all, did not Jesus himself designate loving relationships to be the greatest commandment (Mark 12:30-31)? If

²⁸ O'Donovan, *Biblical Christianity in Modern Africa*, 218-317.

²⁹ For an introduction to this designated successor to Liberation Theology, see J.N.K. Mugambi, *Christian Theology and Social Reconstruction* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2003).

³⁰ Esther J. Kibor, 'The Impact of Friedrich Froebel on Education Through the 19th and 20th Centuries' in *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 23.2, 2004, 190.

Christians are destined for an eternity of fellowship with each other in the presence of God, should not we be practising for that while we are here on earth? And should not we be thinking theologically in an effort to do this more adequately?

Christian relationships can be depicted in the form of a triangle. The left side of the triangle represents the relationship between the individual and God. The relationship between the individual and various groups such as the family, church, community, nation and so on is the base. The right side of the triangle represents the relationship between the group and God.

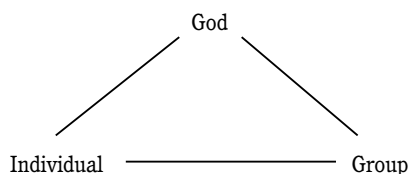


Figure 1

If these are the types of issues and 'worlds' and ministry contexts that African Bible colleges need to deal with, and if relationship-oriented theology is the best way of dealing with these issues, then the relationships suggested by the 'God-Individual-Group' triangle shown in Figure 1 could be organized in the following way.

The triangle illustration suggests three theological core course titles:

Theological Issues 1:

God Transforms Individuals

Theological Issues 2:

God Transforms Human
Relationships in Society

Theological Issues 3:

God Transforms Society Through
the Church

Following the lead of the New Testament writers, I suggest we focus the actual lesson content of these three courses on the existing pastoral issues found amongst church members. Individual Bible colleges or divinity faculties could devise their own list of pastoral issues and revise them as the church and culture change. The following example selects and organizes some likely pastoral issues in a large evangelical, non-charismatic, mission-founded church. For purposes of illustration we assume that each of these three core courses is a 3 credit hour course for a school year with three terms and ten weeks of actual teaching in each term. The bare bones course outlines could look something like this:

*Theological Issues 1: God Transforms
Individuals (27-30 class periods)*

God as Our Loving Heavenly Father (6
class periods)

Salvation by Grace Through Faith and
Its Relationship to Good Works (3
class periods)

Baptism and Catechism—who should
be baptized and when? (3 class peri-
ods)

Our Place in Building the Kingdom of
God (3 class periods)

Christian Attitudes to Healing and
Wealth (6 class periods)

- evaluating the health and wealth
gospel

- developing a theology of suffer-
ing, poverty, contentment

Spiritual Freedom in Christ—dealing
with 'demonization' (3 class peri-
ods)

Curses, Charms and Other Forms of Spiritual Power (3 class periods)

Theological Issues 2: God Transforms Human Relationships in Society (27-30)

Jesus Through African Eyes—truly God and truly Man (3 class periods)

Ethnic Communities and Christian Unity (3 class periods)

Righteousness and Justice in an Unrighteous and Unjust World (6 class periods)

Marriage and Family—polygamy, divorce, raising children etc. (6 class periods)

Men and Women in Biblical and Cultural Perspective (6 class periods)

Leadership Roles for Women in the Church (3 class periods)

Theological Issues 3: God Transforms Society Through the Church (27-30 classes)

The Holy Spirit as a Person not as Power (3 class periods)

Power for Christian Living—causality and power (3 class periods)

Salvation and Sin in Cultural and Biblical Perspective (3 class periods)

Funerals, Culture and Status (3 class periods)

Heaven and the Ideal Life (3 class periods)

Secularism in Society and the Church (6 class periods)

Jesus, the Hope of the World: A Theology of Hope for Africa (3 class periods)

The content of these three courses cannot be explained in detail here, and in any case, they are designed to be suggestive of a new way forward, not the blueprint of a final product. Any number of other issues could be added to or

replace the ones suggested. In addition, a topic in one course might be better placed in another course. Thus one advantage of this framework is flexibility that allows for regional or denominational refinements. It is obviously not a system or anything close to a systematic theology. It is not meant to be. It is only a suggested framework.

IX The Theological Framework

This suggested framework covers as many of the most urgent issues that can be addressed in three three-credit-hour courses. An issues-oriented approach to teaching theology provides the localizing force needed to help Christians live in the world. But without the corresponding tension of the universalizing force of the Bible, African pastoral students lack the power to transform their lives towards Christlikeness and refine their cultures so they become a bit more like the new earth promised at the end of time.

Therefore it is necessary to teach the Bible as the story of salvation from creation to re-creation as a foundational course before embarking on the Theological Issues courses suggested above. This would include a theology of the Bible and the three-term story of salvation as outlined below. This approach provides a basic introduction to each biblical book within the chronologically told story of salvation as well as a very brief survey of the expansion of the church across the globe. Obviously a great deal of detail would have to be left out. This introductory course would then be followed by the three

core pastoral issues theology courses in the second year. This introductory course would form the basis upon which any other Bible and theology courses could be built.

An Introduction to the Bible and the Story of Salvation It Tells

The Nature of the Bible—God's Case Book for Following Jesus (3 class periods)

Revelation and Inspiration of the Bible (3 class periods)

The Role of Theology and Faith in Following Jesus (3 class periods)

The Story of Salvation Told in 12 Ages from Creation to Re-creation (the rest of the first school year)

1. The Age of Beginnings (Genesis 1-11)
2. The Age of the Patriarchs (Genesis 12-50)
3. The Age of the Exodus and Conquest (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua)
4. The Age of the Judges (Judges, Ruth)
5. The Age of the United Kingdom (1, 2 Samuel; 1 Kings 1:1-12:24; 1 Chronicles—2 Chronicles 11:4, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs)
6. The Age of the Divided Kingdom (1 Kings 12-22, 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles 10-36, Isaiah, Lamentations, Jeremiah, Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah)
7. The Age of the Babylonian Exile (Ezekiel, Daniel)
8. The Post-Exilic Age (Joel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)
9. The Age of Christ on Earth (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John)

10. The Age of the Apostolic Church (Acts, the rest of the New Testament)

11. The Age of the Church

12. The Endless Age

X Defending the New Approach

By this time a number of readers, especially western and western trained theologians and educators, may be sceptical or cautious of this approach while others may be excited by its possibilities. Three missionaries and a class of students taking Contemporary Theology in Africa were kind enough to read and comment on an earlier version of this essay and all their comments were helpful. I hope others will feel free to comment on it as well and make suggestions for further improvement.

Two further questions arise.

1) Is it wise to abandon all the theological categories included in the traditional western structure in favour of such an untried approach?

2) Does this African issues oriented approach not leave the student without a 'system', an organizational structure for his theology?

In answer to question one, first let me make clear the fact that I am not questioning the theological truths found in western theologies. I am not saying Africans should re-invent the Trinity or examine whether or not Jesus is fully God and fully human. I am asking that we look for a better way to connect theological truths to the realities of African life and ministry. I believe we need a new structure to help do that. Other ways of re-framing theology exist, such as collecting pastoral

issues under traditional categories and then adding specifically African categories for other pastoral issues left over. Some of my students suggested that these three Theological Issues courses be taught in addition to the traditional western courses.

Secondly, we can ask a counter question, 'Where did this elaborate western theological structure come from?' Very briefly, it developed as theologians wrestled with past issues that came up as a result of the interaction of the gospel with western cultures. Many of these issues were inherited from the entry of the gospel into Greek and Roman culture in the first centuries of Christian history and culminated in the decisions of the early church taken in the first four Ecumenical Councils (Nicaea (325 AD), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451)).³¹

Therefore, if all relevant theology is occasional (ie, if it grows out of real pastors facing real pastoral occasions in their ministry in the church), then African theology needs to develop its own answers to its own questions. This is not a new notion. Richard Gehman states what many others have seen for many years:

The African Christian Church has unique problems which are not faced by any other church in the same manner. Therefore, the

African Christian Church must seek from God in the Scriptures through the illumination of the Holy Spirit the resolution to those problems.³²

In regard to the second question, it is clear that a different structure for Christian theology in Africa will begin without a 'system'. But African students beginning pastoral training do not always need to possess a closely defined and closed theological system in order to function because they can make do with less systematization and precision than westerners.³³ Perceived contradictions need to be addressed, but systemization is not required. The structure they will use to make sense of the individual theological issues is found in the story of salvation. Just as the current western system was not built in a day, so too it will take time for an African system of theology to emerge.³⁴

This attitude to western systematic theologies is different from Tite Tienou and Paul Hiebert who wish to retain both systematic theology and biblical theology and add missional theology to the arsenal of approaches used by missionaries and missiologists. They view

31 See Kwame Bediako, *Theology and Identity: The impact of culture upon Christian thought in the second century and modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992) for a comparison of how these early church fathers and African theologians today wrestle with applying the gospel to their cultures.

32 Richard J. Gehman, *Doing African Christian Theology* (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1987), p. 23. See also Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 196-197 and Kwesi Dickson, *Theology in Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 119.

33 Eunice Okorocho, 'Cultural Issues and the Biblical Message', in Tokunboh Adeyemo ed., *Africa Bible Commentary* (Nairobi: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1467-1468.

34 Parratt, *Reinventing Christianity*, 197.

all three approaches as complementary.³⁵ As Hiebert notes,

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental elements and categories in Scripture. It gives us a standard to test our knowledge and helps us to understand in some measure the biblical worldview—the view of reality as God sees it and as he has revealed it to us in Scripture.³⁶

Among the several weaknesses of systematic theology discussed by Tienou and Hiebert is their statement that systematic theology was a product and reflection of western intellectual history. They go on to affirm that, ‘All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in histories and worldviews that shape the way they see things’.³⁷ Does that not include all forms of systematic theology? If so, then systematic theology does not really have fundamental elements and categories.

XI Unity and Diversity

We may find that Christians throughout history and in various cultures have common connections—a historical connection with previous Christian groups and even back to ancient Israel, Jesus Christ as a person of ultimate significance, the common use of the Bible (in translation), and the common use of bread, wine and water in special

ways.³⁸ These connections exist even when the theology embedded with each element and the practices associated with it may be so different as to often be mutually unrecognizable.

The cultural differences do not need to be immense to produce practices that are unrecognizable as Christian to some believers. For example, at the funeral of the father of one of our Ibibio students, each family member and important visitor threw a handful of dirt on the coffin before the gravediggers filled the grave. This practice is not followed in the neighbouring Annang ethnic group, even though only about twenty miles separated the two groups who share the same language and church denomination. An Annang faculty member who did not toss in a handful of dirt told me privately afterwards that he had never seen this done before and that it must be a pagan practice. If even two such closely related groups could have such different attitudes to a minor variation in funeral rites, how would western evangelicals today react to Irish monks of the 600s reciting psalms while standing in ice-cold water up to their necks? Yet many orthodox but different Christian beliefs and practices exist around the world today.³⁹

If the Bible is God’s revelation to man, and if theology is man’s effort to understand and apply the Bible to himself in his particular situation, then it seems better to regard the Bible as the

35 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 51-53.

36 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 40.

37 Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts*, 42.

38 Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 6-7.

39 See Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, 3-7.

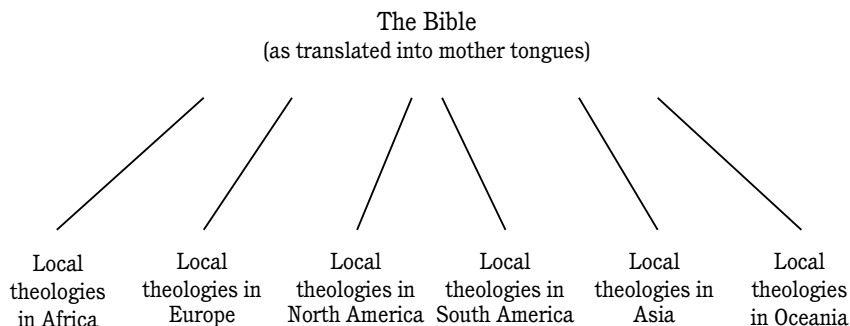


Figure 2

standard that judges all theologies, whether they are developed in Africa or Europe and North America or anywhere else. Figure 2 attempts to illustrate this relationship in a very simple way.

Particular Christian traditions or denominations or mission boards may also be involved in the construction of local theologies alongside or under indigenous believers, but in the end it will be those groups of indigenous believers who read their Bibles in their mother tongues who will decide on the structure and content of their own theologies as they grapple with their own particular issues in their own cultures and situations.⁴⁰ Walls states that 'Theology already existing may help to clarify the issues, but it does not have the resources to make the final decision. It was shaped for other purposes, under the conditions of another time and place'.⁴¹

This type of theology will not arise solely or even primarily from Africa's many academic theologians. Here I make a distinction between academic theology in Africa and what might be called 'vernacular' or 'popular theology'.⁴² Academic theology results in published books and journals while vernacular theology is the theology that ordinary church members live by. It is not limited to what their denominational statement of faith contains and much of it remains oral or even unstated.⁴³

There is a large and continually growing body of African academic theology in print today with both African and non-African writers contributing. But these are most often the author's

⁴⁰ Gichure, *Contextual Theology*, pp. 143-175, writing from within Roman Catholicism, carves out a place for local theologies within that system of authority and doctrine.

⁴¹ Andrew Walls, 'Forward' in Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity*, xv.

⁴² The term 'vernacular theology' comes from William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 16 ff.

⁴³ Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology*, 31. See G.O. West, *Contextual Bible Study* (Pietermaritzburg, Cluster Publications, 1993) for an example of an academic interacting with ordinary church members.

scholarly treatment of African theological themes. Many of these themes also reflect pastoral issues, while others examine a traditional Christian theological category from an African perspective.⁴⁴ Even a combined literature and field research study, such as Diane Stinton's fine work on Christology,⁴⁵ cannot cover the popular ideas of Christology among all segments of the Christian population. Her extensive interviews do not cover rural farmers for example. But it is among such people that much of vernacular Christology resides.

How can pastors help their members become more Christ-like in their relationships with one another if their images of Christ are restricted to Jesus as personal saviour from sin?⁴⁶ How can a Jesus who was unmarried and without male heirs, who was poor and at odds with the religious authorities, who died a criminal's death at a young age and was buried in a borrowed grave far from home, who in other words failed to achieve anything in traditional African terms—how can he be a model for Africans today? Is it any wonder that the lives of many ordinary church members do not display as much Christ-likeness as their pastors would

like? Where and how should the truth about Jesus be applied in the lives of Christians in Africa?

Field research in vernacular theology can reveal to diploma students and their teachers the African farmers' answers to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' (Mt. 15:16), to the question of whether or not women should wear trousers (at all or in church), to the question of women in leadership and to the myriad other questions that African Christians are asking in the rural areas.

Just because the two latter questions seem to be largely settled in Nairobi and some other urban centres does not mean that rural regions have settled them. In fact, some people from urban centres who visit their home villages often create tensions over these and other issues as they try to introduce new practices from the city into the village church. There are plenty of pastoral issues in both urban and rural areas of Africa to keep theologians busy for many years to come.

XII Conclusion

This suggestion to contextualize the structure of theology in Africa arose out of real life situations in the church. It advocates an issues-oriented approach to structuring and teaching African theology, combined with field research on chosen issues. The issues would change from college to college and from time to time as culture changes, but would focus on issues relating to relationships, not concepts divorced from life's issues. This echoes the approach used by the New Testament writers and allows time for an African 'systematic theology' to arise.

44 See West and Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa*, for examples of both approaches in regard to the Bible.

45 Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa*, (Nairobi: Paulines, 2004).

46 For an example of a limited Christology see, John M. Waliggo, 'African Christology In A Situation Of Suffering' in Robert J. Schreiter, ed, *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, (London: SCM Press, 1992), 175-176 where the author notes that Catholic theology students often saw Jesus as irrelevant.